

BOOKENDS

A TRUTH THAT MATTERS

For personal inspiration or group study.

A Biblical and Anabaptist Vision
for the Matthew 16:18 Church of the 21st Century,
inviting us into the Holy Spirit empowered
Abundant Life and fruitful service
of the Kingdom of God on the earth.

ABUNDANT LIFE SERIES 2

Offered in the spirit of Hebrews 10:24
Ken Stoltzfus

A bronze statue of a lion is positioned in the lower right quadrant of the image. To its right is a red leather-bound book with gold-colored decorative bands. The word "Genesis" is written vertically in white, sans-serif font along the spine of the book.

Genesis

BOOKENDS

A TRUTH THAT MATTERS

30 SECONDS?

What would I say if I had only 30 seconds of your attention? Here it is.

We American Christians have failed to be preserving salt or a guiding light to our nation and will soon pay a price for that.

God intends that the Church would demonstrate the Abundant Life of His Kingdom and declare the Gospel to the ends of the earth, but we have been distracted by Satan's temptations and lies and are not doing well at either living it or proclaiming it. The American Dream has become our god.

I say confidently that we are headed for trouble that we are not prepared for. The saints of Hebrews 11 were, and the early Anabaptists were, but we are not. Many among us will crumble as our present forms of religion yield to the pressure to survive in an environment that is overtly hostile to Biblical faith.

If we took radical steps today in following Jesus, and the troubles that I and many others anticipate don't come for another 50 years, we would have wasted nothing. We would simply have become more like what Jesus always expected us to be. It's a win-win situation!

We *can* do better, we *must* do better, and we'll be eternally grateful when we do. Let's do it—together!

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DEDICATION



I dedicate BOOKENDS to the memory of my late wife, Elaine (Beiler) Stoltzfus (May 28, 1941 – September 22, 2022) She partnered with me in pursuing Jesus in our hearts and in following Him in life-shaping ways for nearly 63 years.

Elaine trusted Jesus in a way that enabled her to trust me in multiple daring adventures of literally walking into the dark as “one” as we followed Him. Such adventures would have been reckless if they were not of God.

I learned more about faith from her than from any preacher. She selflessly loved, prayed for, forgave, and partnered with me in a journey that included setting up housekeeping 21 times in five states and in Africa, but she never complained. Her journals inspire me beyond words and bring me to tears.

Elaine contributed immensely to raising Ken Jr., Brian, and Mark, who all became men of God who viewed life from the standpoint of our indebtedness to Jesus and our responsibility to make Him known to others.

She was a practitioner of the principles of this book, not a theologian with theories for others. She rarely held a mic, but her life shouted these truths. Her gentle and quiet spirit and serving heart made an indelible impression upon countless others including the many she counseled in her 34 years as a Pregnancy Care Center volunteer.

I celebrate Elaine’s presence with Jesus and our two sons there, as I await His upward call myself and will do well to remain faithful to the end as she did.

Ken Stoltzfus

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AS YOU READ THIS LITTLE BOOK,

May you *“be filled with the knowledge of His will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding, so that you will walk in a manner worthy of the Lord, to please Him in all respects, bearing fruit in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God; strengthened with all power, according to His glorious might, for the attaining of all perseverance and patience; joyously giving thanks to the Father, who has qualified us to share in the inheritance of the saints in light. For He rescued us from the domain of darkness, and transferred us to the kingdom of His beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.”* (Colossians 1:9b-14 NASB)

FIRST WORDS...

Men can write nothing as important as what God has said, so I will start with these words to set the framework for what follows.

"Then Yahweh God commanded the man by saying, 'From every tree of the garden you may freely eat, but you must not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, because on the day you eat from it you will surely die.'"
(Genesis 2:16-17)

"For God so loved the world, that he gave his One and Only Son, so that everyone who believes in him would not perish but would have eternal life." (John 3:16)

"Do not store up for yourselves treasures on the earth, where moth and rust destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. Instead, store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys, and where thieves do not break in nor steal. For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also. The lamp of the body is the eye. No one is able to serve two masters, for either he will hate the one and will love the other, or else he will be devoted to one and will despise the other. You are not able to serve God and wealth."
(Matthew 6:19-22a, 24)

"The kingdom of heaven is like a treasure hidden in the field, which a man found and hid again; and from joy over it he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field. Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant seeking fine pearls, and upon finding one pearl of great value, he went and sold all that he had and bought it." (Matthew 13:44-46, NASB)

"My Father has given me all authority over everything and everyone in heaven and on earth. So go, and use my authority to teach my message to people of all people groups so that they may become my disciples. Baptize them to be under the authority of the Father, of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Teach them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember that I will be with you always, until the end of this age." (Matthew 28:18b-20, UST)

"But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses both in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth." (Acts 1:8)

"Examine me, God, and know my heart; test me and know my thoughts. See if there is any wicked way in me, and lead me in the path of forever." (Psalm 139:22-24)

"For the word of the cross is foolishness to the ones perishing, but to us, the ones being saved, it is the power of God." (I Corinthians 1:18)

PREFACE

What nation in history except Israel has been so blessed by God and so marked for His purposes, as America has been? And what nation in history except Israel has turned their back to Him and rejected His rule, as America has? And what were the consequences for Israel when they did that?

What does it say about us, that we think we can escape the judgment that follows the rejection of God by those who had been so marked and blessed by His presence?

I believe that because of the way we in America have turned against God, those who turn to Him in the coming trouble will hear a repeat of His words in Isaiah 48:10-11:

“Look, I refined you, but not as silver; I have purified you in the furnace of affliction. For my own sake, for my own sake I will act; for how can I allow my name to be profaned? I will not give my glory to anyone else.”

I pray that we will view such refining not only as judgment but as an act of His mercy—giving us another opportunity to turn back to Him.

However, the Church’s present inattention to wars that impact us globally, troubling weather phenomena, deepening corruption in our government, and the ever-growing influence of those who call good evil and evil good, intensifies my sense that many will “go along for the ride” as long as they can indulge in the American Dream.

This refining fire will be an occasion for the Church to repent and again become God’s people (1 Peter 2:9-10), but I have less confidence that there will be an opportunity for America to repent as a nation. As Israel did at times with Baal worship, we have crossed some lines that set us on a nearly irreversible track toward judgment.

I encourage us to set our eyes on God and His eternal Kingdom, and find ourselves in Him in deeper ways that will enable us to remain faithful to Him and to each other even to death. This is serious!

BOOKENDS is written to encourage the Church to prepare for that Day and to help us turn to God more sincerely in the meantime. To become more like He always expected us to be. We have nothing to lose and everything to gain. Nothing. Everything.

NOBODY, ANYBODY, EVERYTHING

I cannot write as an expert—only as a fellow traveler and explorer in the Kingdom of God. I don't have it all figured out and will be learning and growing until I take my first breath in heaven.

However, I do write as one who has seen more than a few decades of life rush by and has witnessed the transformation of the Church as we adapted to changes (moral decline) in the society around us. We have abandoned our footing on the Rock.

My journey of protest began on the opinion boards at Eastern Mennonite College (now EMU) in the 1960s when Lyndon B. Johnson was president of the U.S.A. Student protests against the Vietnam War were heating up, and “women’s lib” was a growing phenomenon. That era marked the arrival of an anti-authority spirit that impacted the nation and the Church deeply.

I observe the Church from a mindset shaped by a family culture of aviators who are alert to threats to safety, and entrepreneurs who are given to excellence. Layered on top of that are the perspectives of a pastor and Bible teacher who is plagued with a calling to the watchman charge of Ezekiel 3:17-19 and 33:1-9.

BOOKENDS’ repeated call to obedience is not a call to the fear-based obedience to the Law, but the ready and cheerful obedience of a heart that is set free in Christ; loves Him enough to want to obey Him (John 14:21-23); and considers no price too high to pay for His rewards now and in the life to come.

Nobody agrees with anybody about everything, and nearly everyone can find something they don’t like in BOOKENDS. But please, before you judge me in error in either content or motive, consider if your disagreement is based on Scripture or on what organized religion and society tell you.

I expect to learn from your responses, including negative ones, so please feel free to give your opinion. I hope I can be a better Jesus follower because of you. Nevertheless, I promise that if you are hungry for more of Jesus you will find a bountiful spread in these pages.

INTRODUCTION

I want to follow Jesus in the spirit that my Anabaptist forebearers modeled. They were among history's most authentic Jesus followers and examples of His Matthew 16:18 Church, after the first century. I don't always do that well but will continue to passionately pursue II Corinthians 3:18 transformation into His image for as long as I live.

It is said of the early Anabaptists: "Their faith in Christ and vision to follow Him in all aspects of life, even to the death, were genuine. No human being was able to take away out of their hearts what they had experienced, such zealous lovers of God were they" (Guy F. Hersherberger editor, *The Recovery of the Anabaptist Vision*, Herald Press, 1957, pg. 33).

BOOKENDS assumes that Jesus really does require His disciples to walk in the focused and costly discipleship that the early Church and the Anabaptists modeled, and the belief that we Christians, Anabaptists and otherwise, have a lot of work to do if that is true.

THE BACK STORY

I was born (1940), raised, baptized, high school and college educated, and ordained (1974) in the Mennonite tradition.

We were good people and were respected in our community. We had our obvious signs of separation from the world around us and many bishop-enforced rules to assure them, but we were the quiet in the land. We rarely talked about Jesus with our neighbors and seldom even among ourselves in a personal way.

The industriousness and integrity that our culture instilled in us helped us succeed as entrepreneurs. From 1958-67, I was a partner in an avia-

tion business in Coatesville, Pennsylvania, with my father, the late Chris D. Stoltzfus (1913-1981), and my late twin, Karl D. Stoltzfus (1940-2020), with a large fleet of aircraft and an aircraft parts business; again with Karl, as K&K Aircraft in Harrisonburg, VA, from 1967-74; and finally, in founding Preferred Airparts with and for my sons in Kidron, Ohio, in 1982. I handed Preferred Airparts over to them in 1985 and became their employee, and they, with God's obvious counsel and blessing built it into the prominent, Kingdom-oriented aviation enterprise that it is today.

Elaine and I had those three opportunities to gain wealth, but each time God called us to choose otherwise just as they got to a good place.

MY FATHER THE CROP DUSTER

By his example as a pioneer crop duster on the East Coast, aviator par excellence, and a businessman with the highest level of integrity, my earthly father imparted to me a spirit of pursuing excellence and of always looking for a better way to do things. We bought larger and larger aircraft including a four-engine, WWII Boeing B-17G Flying Fortress bomber, and developed increasingly efficient spray and firefighting systems as we broadened our markets for using them.

It was a wonderful career opportunity whose family and company culture helped equip me for my heavenly Father's invitation to something more directly Kingdom-focused.

OUR HIGHEST CALLING

In His own way, my heavenly Father had placed within me a desire to be about His business regardless of what I was doing in life. It was an invitation into a life that is bigger than life itself because of its connection to Him and His eternal purposes.

I came to believe that one's highest calling is to do whatever God sets before us in any given moment, in a way that honors Him and partners with Him in fulfilling His purpose of spreading the Gospel. It didn't matter if I was spraying forest or swamps with a 1940s Douglas DC-3 airliner, serving as a pastor, teaching in Africa, buying and selling aircraft parts, or writing—it was all the same to me. It was about Him.

He put within me a willingness to dare to follow Him and blessed me with a wife who joined me in that for nearly 63 years.

TOOLS FOR THE TRADE

Elaine and I prayed to receive the Baptism of the Holy Spirit in May of 1970. According to Acts 1:8, this would empower us to help fulfill the Great

Commission. Like all good Charismatics, we took in the conferences, listened to the cassette tapes, read the books, raised our hands in worship, prayed for the sick, prayed in tongues—and invited others into this new and wonderful dimension of life.

But I was never fully at ease. It just felt like something was askew. Sure, we were “happy Charismatics,” but the supposed empowerment wasn’t producing the results that it did in the early Church. I didn’t see the Charismatic community bearing either the fruit of the Spirit or the fruit of winning souls in a way that set us apart from our “non” friends. Nor were the I Corinthians 12 supernatural Gifts of the Spirit flowing naturally and in a trustworthy way.

For decades then, I was in sort of a “tween” place. Some on the “non” side were uncomfortable with my embracing and teaching the Charismatic approach to spiritual gifts, but I held back from fully giving myself to the “pro” side’s apparent shallow, often self-centered “me and Jesus” thing and was regarded with some reservation there.

While in seminary part-time in 1972-74 I had studied the work of the Holy Spirit in Acts and was touched by how directly it was connected to the Apostles’ commitment to the mission-focused life that Jesus calls us to. It was the life of Spirit-empowered holiness and effective mission that naturally follows true repentance and being born again into the Life of a different spiritual kingdom.

I came to believe that authentic holiness and dedication to mission are an inseparable duo that follows our being sanctified. And that being separated unto Christ implies being separated from the world as we refuse to love its “things” (I John 2:15-17). And that, while holiness and mission naturally follow sanctification and can’t exist without it, free will means that we alone decide to what degree we will be sanctified.

And I came to the awareness that our obedience to the Great Commission engages us in a battle between the two spiritual kingdoms that vie for our allegiance, and that we need Acts 1:8 power if we hope to deal with the Ephesians 6:12 dark forces that oppose us. Along with that came the belief that the I Corinthians 12 supernatural gifts are in the toolbox that God gives us to do His work.

TO CLARIFY

I hasten to clarify that, while I embrace the Biblical model of Holy Spirit empowerment and the Gifts of the Spirit, it is important that we “test the spirits” as John writes in I John 4:1. Not all that is supernatural is of God and the I Corinthians 12:10 spiritual gift of discernment is needed.

My sense is that Charismatics have often gauged their (our) spirituality by acceptance of the I Corinthians 12 spiritual gifts, and especially tongues, but are basically ineffective because we have not surrendered to the Lordship of Christ in holiness or in embracing the mission that the gifts were given for, and it produced a tainted (at best) version of the Spirit-filled life.

Secondly, that the “non’s,” who might be more given to His mission in a certain way (though rarely to the extent that it interfered with their pursuit of the American Dream), were also largely ineffective because they rejected the power tools that God gives us to do His work.

The issue then, is one of authentic repentance that leads to radical surrender to the Lordship of Christ in a way that produces Spirit-empowered holiness and mission—and that is as unpopular today as it was in Jesus’ day. The call to the life of the Kingdom of God that separates us from the world will remain unpopular in America for at least as long as we can continue to pursue the American Dream.

A LINE OF DEMARCATION

If I seem to talk about money and possessions a lot, it’s because Jesus said that the measure to which we find identity, comfort, and inner security in having them, is a prime indicator of where the eye of our heart is set. They are a primary line of demarcation between the two spirit realms whose gods vie for the affection and loyalty of our hearts.

What thought process, or whose influence, has led us to think that we *may* live the self-indulgent life of the American Dream because we *can*? Why do we think that we American Christians can isolate ourselves from our brothers and sisters in the Body of Christ who are in desperate need in other parts of the world? Are we not one family?

More to come on that, and please check with Jesus before you dismiss me as unrealistic.

FOREWARNED IS FOREARMED

I caution you that truly following Jesus will set you apart from many in your religious community, including family and friends—not just from the world.

We must also know that truth is prophetic, and that declaring it threatens hypocrisy and the religious institutions that enable it. We must guard against speaking strongly out of personal insecurity or other fleshly influences, and only speak because we love the Church and will speak the words that Jesus gives us even if they make us unpopular.

I have never spoken or written with as pure a heart as Jesus had, and I constantly try to do better, but I reject the excuse that "It's not what you say, it's how you say it." Truth irritates spiritual lukewarmness.

Yes, following Jesus is a high calling. It forbids embracing the American Dream and requires taking up our cross daily. And even today, repeating what He said it means to follow Him, creates antagonism against us as He said it would.

I am alarmed by the measures that some "good pastors" take to protect their flock from anything that challenges their religious complacency. Too many pastors have given themselves to "preaching to itching ears" (II Timothy 4:3) in a way that they cannot speak truth to the needs of the Day. That will be tragic in the soon-coming troubles.

Even today one can be banned from Sunday School classes in a highly respected Mennonite church for expressing opinions like you have already read here.

If you speak truth in a godly spirit and are spoken evil of, consider yourself blessed (Matthew 5:11), and pray for those who persecute you (Matthew 5:44). And if Jesus invites you to roast a Thanksgiving turkey for your accuser (Romans 12:21), do it and He will bless you.

Read Hebrews 3:14. Persevere in living radically for Jesus, and humbly but boldly speak what He gives you.

And finally, take comfort in knowing that, as David wrote in Psalm 37:1-11, God will vindicate you (v6) in whatever measure you deserve it. Rest in the Lord and avoid fretting, and you will be blessed. It might take years or even decades, but it's worth the wait. And if you believe Romans 12:19 you might even find yourself praying for mercy upon those who do evil against you.

CONCLUDING AN INTRODUCTION

What is life about, anyway? Better yet, *who* is it about?

We take ourselves very seriously. We want everything and everyone to make us happy. We have a palatable but often undefined emptiness in our gut that we are driven to try to satisfy. A longing for "something more." A yearning for something transcendent but always just out of reach. "If only I had - -!"

That changes, when we realize it is all about Him. About Creator God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit from whom we are separated by sin, but Who has made a way for us to come back to Him and be filled to running over.

It changes, when we confess our utter failure at finding our fulfillment by doing things our way. And when we accept the truth that His way into that

life through the cross is the only way, even though it is the ultimate violation of the nature we inherited from Adam.

The fact is, that His way *is* the only good way, and life in His Light *is* more than we could ever hope for in our few years on earth as we prepare for eternity—but it's a choice for all who have heard the Gospel.

Our life here, then, is where we have the opportunity to choose His way and receive Abundant Life—or to choose otherwise.

My only desire for BOOKENDS is that it will encourage you to choose His way even though it is very different from the way of many around you, religious and otherwise, who refuse the Light or at least prefer to walk in the shadows.

The truth is, that the Bible, from Genesis to Revelation, is the story of God and man. The story of man rejecting God and becoming separated from Him and the life He offers. The story of His plan to redeem man—but with His one unalterable condition. It matters, for now and forever, for us and for those we influence. Thus “BOOKENDS, A Truth That Matters”!

Enjoy!

GENERIC DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Discussion questions for personal or group study and may be used in any chapter. Make copies two-up.

1) Which of these words describe your response to this chapter:

affirmed	encouraged	instructed
convicted	challenged	doubting
upset	frustrated	excited

2) Was anything life-giving to you?

3) Is the Holy Spirit inviting you to take any action steps or make any new commitments?

4) What personal insights would you add to this chapter?

5) Do you disagree with anything in this chapter?

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REALITY CHECK

Do you think that what we know in much of the world as “the church” is truly the spiritual Body that Jesus had in mind in Matthew 16:18, and that all is well? If so, please be forewarned that BOOKENDS challenges us to examine such an assumption.

Regardless, I invite you to consider a life journey that leads to the freedom, joy, and peace of the Garden of Eden. We were created for the “Life* of the Garden” that flows into us as we are reunited with Creator God through His Son Jesus. It is the mystery of I Corinthians 2:7, which is altogether spirit in nature and cannot be understood by the natural man (I Corinthians 2:14-16).

The driving force within me is an attempt to encourage the Church to believe in and give ourselves to Jesus and His Kingdom in a way that glorifies Him, enriches us, and draws others toward His Life. However, that process compels us to consider some less-than-complimentary realities about much of the organized church of our Day, especially in America.

SOMETHING’S WRONG

I love the Church, and it grieves me to speak negatively, but we must be honest if we hope to become more fully the people of God.

We haven’t done well at showing the world how good God is. We have not made Christianity appealing to the lost in a way that attracts them to Him. Our lives have not borne testimony to our profession of faith, because we have not surrendered to Jesus in a way that makes room for Him to rule in us so that His character prevails in us and invites others to Him.

And in spite of our huge and comfortable “churches” with the latest technology and the most seeker-friendly programs imaginable, we have failed miserably at winning the lost to Jesus. We can barely keep our own children in the church.

It’s time for change—a change that cuts to the roots of our present religious life and reconnects us to the Life and

Mission of Jesus. Change that equips us to engage in the great harvest that will come in the midst of suffering—and I fully expect to be part of both.

This Life is only possible for those who embrace the humble but bold hearts that were modeled by the early Church and those of the Anabaptist Reformation, who are called “Radical” for a reason.

If we of the Anabaptist community (and others) were to turn to Christ as He calls us to, we would be no less radical than the Radical Reformation of 1525. We would stand out, even in our Mennonite and Amish communities, as much as our forebearers did among other reformers of their day.

Radical faith, the only way to truly follow Christ, connects us to the Life of the Father Himself and makes our few years here more rewarding and fruitful than most can imagine. It also lays up treasure in heaven to be enjoyed for eternity! Yes, it is costly, but it is like buying pure gold for a penny an ounce.

Things will change dramatically when more saints, who now hold Matthew 6:19 forbidden treasure, come to find greater satisfaction in *giving* to extend the Kingdom of God than in *accumulating* personal wealth on the earth. It will be so because their identity and sense of success have become more in “things above” than in things of the earth (Colossians 3:1). What a day that will be for the billions of souls who are still waiting for the Good News!

* I use the form “Life” to speak of the abundant and overflowing Spirit-based life that we were created for. It is from the beautiful little Greek word *zōé* (Strong’s 2222), the Life that was present in the Garden of Eden and that can now be ours in the ways that matter most because of Romans 5:6-21 “much more” work of Jesus, the Second Adam. Read that, believe it, and be transformed!

See discussion questions on page 22-23.

You may freely copy chapters for use in your Bible study, small group, or similar setting.

Ken Stoltzfus

Elaine and I saw ourselves as “Christian” more than as Mennonites. We freely worshiped in and served a Pentecostal church in Kenya for eight years, and a Nazarene church in Ohio for 12 years, but my periodic interaction in the Mennonite/Amish community from birth until now imparts to me a specific burden for that faith community.

Anabaptists have a unique and rich spiritual heritage that supports one experiencing life deeply, but it comes with vulnerabilities.

Our forebearers applied their spirituality to obeying Jesus in life in the Kingdom of God, and to sharing it with others. Their faith culture made them rich in the Life of the Kingdom even when they were among those described in the “former days” of Hebrews 10:32-34.

Could that be said of us, or have we instead exploited our culture of industriousness and integrity to achieve prosperity in the things of the world? They made their choices, we make ours.

We like to think we are the way we are because of faith, but if it were truly of faith, wouldn’t it produce a love for the Kingdom of God and His righteousness that is reflected in passion to extend His Kingdom more than our own? More in laying up treasure in heaven than on earth? What do “do not” in Matthew 6:19, and “but” in v20 mean?

Our industriousness and integrity are blessings if they produce financial resources that we pour into the Kingdom of God so that others can come to know Jesus. They are spiritually detrimental if we consider their fruit our own, enabling us to accumulate earthly things for our comfort, pleasure and ego satisfaction—even if we try to do so behind a cloak of religious observances and cultural “simplicity.”

Earthly wealth is a wonderful servant but a cruel master. No amount of earthly treasure can come even close to the richness of soul that accompanies a life connected to the Kingdom of God and His purposes in the way that true Anabaptism modeled. And what else can suck such Life out of us in the way that love for the world and its “things” can?

REPENTANCE OR --?

If we repent before the American economy crashes (and the time is short), it will result in the release of hundreds of millions of our forbidden treasure. (Matthew 6:19)

That will result in eternal life for countless of the present two billion least reached and unreached humans made in God's image, and including over 3,000 people groups who have not yet heard the Good News of Jesus. Jesus paid the price for *their* redemption too. Did I say the time is short?

If we *don't* repent, their destiny is hell and eternal separation from God, and we will be held accountable for the pride and selfishness that enabled us to squander upon ourselves the resources that He entrusted to us for the very purpose of telling them about Him.

Our shortsightedness will also rob us and those whom we influence, of the eternal rewards that follow faithful stewardship. We are but bond-servants, and all that we consider ours, is His. What if we took Luke 19:12-27 as seriously as Jesus meant it? The time is short.

THERE IS HOPE!

However, I want to follow that potentially negative-sounding rant with this.

We are in the End Times. Some agree because of the growing darkness, but I see it because of the growing Light. God is on the move!

There is an awakening across the Church, including the Anabaptist community, that many don't see. I hear it regularly when engaged in earnest dialogue with my Amish, Mennonite, and other friends.

I hear an awareness that God is calling us to the holiness, unity, and mission of the Matthew 16:18 Church as seen in the early Church and in our Anabaptist forebearers. The Biblical Anabaptists! You probably won't hear that unless you engage in conversation about real things, but it's there.

I am amazed over and over. Many are being drawn to the Light and are ready to respond, but at this point they don't know how to express it or who to connect with. They fear the rejection that would come if they talked about it openly, but we'll soon see God bearing witness to kindred spirits and there will be a groundswell of true believers. But I'm getting ahead of myself.

See discussion questions on page 22-23.

Man was made for the Garden. His body and soul (mind, will, and emotions) were designed for that carefree and stress-free environment.

Man was whole and complete there, needing and wanting nothing. Yes, the Garden's tranquility, harmony, freedom, and abounding joy were what God had in mind for mankind when He created us—and that hasn't changed.

No anger, selfishness, jealousy, sickness, pain, death, or sorrow could exist there because it was ruled by God and reflected His character. He wanted the very best for man—the crowning masterpiece of His creation who was to be more glorious than any sunrise or sunset.

SO WHY – –?

So why did Adam and Eve take that first bite out of the apple?

And why do we get “upset” so easily about trivial things that insult our egos—things that have absolutely nothing to do with anything that really matters?

And why do so many Christians, even those who profess to believe in the love and sovereignty of God, lay in bed sleepless for hours on end with worries and fears about their children or grandchildren? Or their salvation? Or their job? Or their 401k? Or the other political party? Or anger about injustices done against them even decades ago?

And why are multiple millions of people in faraway places, even our brothers and sisters in Christ, suffering physically and even starving to death?

And why is the “just once more” voice so compelling at the buffet or at the computer? And “this will make you happy” at the tech store?

Why are there so many wars? And quarrels, murders, rapes, abortions, family fights, divorces, and distraught children?

And why do so many Christians eat junk food that makes them overweight and wreaks havoc on their bodies?

And why did my firstborn, Ken Jr., die on July 15, 2011, after a seven-year battle with brain tumors? And why did my second born, Brian, die in a horrific airplane crash right here at

the family airport on January 21, 2019? And why did my twin and bosom mate, Karl, succumb to pancreatitis on November 27, 2020? And why did Elaine, my precious wife and life partner, suffer from gastric lymphoma for two years and then leave this earth on September 22, 2022?

And why are so many of our unsaved neighbors still unsaved? And why have over two billion people never heard the Gospel and had the opportunity to choose Jesus as their Savior?

And why do I find it so hard to fast? And why is the Church so fractured, when Jesus prayed for our unity and made it possible?

And why are we so bashful about telling people about Jesus when we are so eager to tell them about our new recipe or gun or tech gadget or pickup truck or – –?

LET ME TELL YOU WHY!

It's all because of the influence of the thief and liar whom Jesus called the prince (ruler) of this world (John 12:31 and 14:30). All pain, sorrow, suffering and death, and all human need, point to his rule and graphically portray his character.

He hates God and those who love Him. He hates righteousness and those who walk in it. He is the one of whom Jesus said, "The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy" (John 10:10a, NIV).

BUT – –

But the devil doesn't get the last word—God does. He set in motion a plan to rescue man from such bondage and brokenness and to give us Abundant Life that is closer to that of the Garden than most dare to believe. It is for all who hear, believe, and obey the Gospel.

God didn't promise to keep us from hardship, but He did promise to be with us in a way that we can experience Abundant Life even in the midst of our few years here as we prepare for eternity in His Presence. Even in the midst of intense suffering. Still, it is conditional—it always comes with an "if," and we will be making life-and-death choices as long as we draw breath.

See discussion questions on page 22-23.

Man's problem with obeying Creator God is a common thread through the chronicles of mankind, and the predetermined present and eternal consequences of obedience or disobedience are clear. The bookends of the history of the God-man relationship are "Obedience Matters."

Obedience versus disobedience was the pivotal issue in Adam and Eve's life in the Garden, in the Fall of Man, and in Jesus becoming our Savior. And now that Jesus has done His work on earth and returned to the Father, it is the pivotal issue in the measure to which we experience the Abundant Life of the New Covenant (John 10:10) and are useful to Him in fulfilling the Great Commission. (Matthew 28:18-20)

It's not complicated. Obedience and disobedience each have their consequences, and we must choose—even multiple times a day. We reenact the Garden scene over and over as we face choices about obeying God, or doing it our way because we believe Satan's lie and think we can be our own god and decide between good and evil for ourselves.

Do we take that seriously? My sense is that we often trivialize God's commands and His call to obedience, and further, that those who refuse are not prepared for the coming hardship and even risk hearing Jesus' Matthew 7:21-23 words when they take their last breath on earth.

"Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter into the kingdom of the heavens, but the one who does the will of my Father who is in the heavens. Many will say to me in that day, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and in your name cast out demons, and in your name do many mighty deeds?' And then I will publicly declare to them, 'I never knew you! Go away from me, you who are practicing lawlessness!'"

Christians like to talk about having faith, but the only faith that matters is that which leads to obedience. Anything less is empty words and reveals our self-deception. As you read this little book, ask yourself if any word is more consequential than that little two-letter one, "if."

FROM COVER TO COVER

The truth that obedience matters is presented in Genesis 2 and is infused into God's Word all the way to the last chapter of Revelation.

- Genesis 2:16-17 - *"Then Yahweh God commanded the man by saying, 'From every tree of the garden you may freely eat, but you must not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, because on the day you eat from it you will surely die.'"*
- Revelation 22:11-12 - *"Let the one who is unrighteous still be unrighteous, and let the morally filthy one still be morally filthy, and let the righteous one still do righteousness, and let the holy one still be holy. Behold, I am coming quickly, and my reward is with me, to pay back each one just as his deeds are."*

This truth is on full display throughout the history of man from the Fall until today. We see its graphic portrayal in the history of Israel and in America, and it will be confirmed through eternity. Obedience matters.

Obedience was the condition upon which Adam and Eve could have enjoyed the Life of the Garden forever, and the brokenness of our nation today reveals the consequence of their disobedience and ours.

Obedience to God is the basis upon which the Abundant Life that Jesus, the Second Adam (Romans 5) offers, may be enjoyed now and forever, while sorrow and pain, and eternal separation from Him are the consequences of disobedience.

The ready submission of a grateful bond-slave to his benevolent master is a precondition of Christian discipleship, and holiness is the only pathway to true happiness. This is so very different from the fear-based and/or legalistic obedience to the Old Testament Law, and from the rules that men create for us in organized religion.

Obedience matters, and if nothing else would do it, the condition of our nation, because of the condition of the church in America, should take us to our knees.

See discussion questions on page 22-23.

AND IT'S AN AGE-OLD TRUTH

Deuteronomy 8:11-20 speaks instruction and warning to us in a powerful way.

The principle here is true of Americans in general but is especially true of the Anabaptist community because of how we have prospered. Our history shows that more than once when our ancestors prospered because of their industriousness, their faith cooled. Has that happened in America?

"When you have eaten and are satisfied, praise the Lord your God for the good land he has given you. Be careful that you do not forget the Lord your God, failing to observe his commands, his laws and his decrees that I am giving you this day. Otherwise, when you eat and are satisfied, when you build fine houses and settle down, and when your herds and flocks grow large and your silver and gold increase and all you have is multiplied, then your heart will become proud and you will forget the Lord your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery. You may say to yourself, 'My power and the strength of my hands have produced this wealth for me.' But remember the Lord your God, for it is he who gives you the ability to produce wealth, and so confirms his covenant, which he swore to your ancestors, as it is today. If you ever forget the Lord your God and follow other gods and worship and bow down to them, I testify against you today that you will surely be destroyed. Like the nations the Lord destroyed before you, so you will be destroyed for not obeying the Lord your God." (Deuteronomy 8:11-20 NIV)

What thoughts or questions come to mind as you read that?

AND THERE'S MORE

Read what God told Moses about this in Deuteronomy 30:11-20 and note that He uses the word "command" three times, and "obey/obedience" five times. This so boldly and clearly lays out the consequences of our choosing to obey, or not.

"Now what I am commanding you today is not too difficult for you or beyond your reach. It is not up in heaven, so that you have to ask, 'Who will ascend into heaven to get it and proclaim it to us so we may obey it?' Nor is it beyond the sea, so that you have to ask, 'Who will cross the sea to get it and proclaim it to us so we may obey it?' No, the word is very near you; it is in your mouth and in your heart so you may obey it. See, I set before you today life and prosperity, death and destruction. For I command you today to love the Lord your God, to walk in obedience to him, and to keep his commands, decrees and laws; then you will live and increase, and the Lord your God will bless you in the land you are entering to possess. But if your heart turns away and you are not obedient, and if you are drawn away to bow down to other gods and worship them, I declare to you this day that you will certainly be destroyed. You will not live long in the land, you are crossing the Jordan to enter and possess. This day I call the heavens and the earth as witnesses against you that I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Now choose life, so that you and your children may live and that you may love the Lord your God, listen to his voice, and hold fast to him. For the Lord is your life, and he will give you many years in the land he swore to give to your fathers, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.'" (NIV)

Does that sound as final to you as it does to me? Do we have reason to think obedience as a prerequisite to Eternal Life (present and future) is waived because we live in the Day of Grace? For Israel, it had to do with their being an earthly nation, but today it applies just as much to the Church as the I Peter 2:9 *Holy Nation*.

See discussion questions on page 22-23.

There is within every human breast the sense of something or someone greater than us. Our human spirit is the part of us that is made in the image of Creator God, and it longs for connection with Him. Can't you feel that soul-hunger, that persistent yearning, inside of you?

WE NEED A GOD

Every human being needs help from a spirit source outside of us. A power greater than us who makes life good for us. A god.

By creation design we must be subservient to a god who gives us identity, security, purpose, and a sense of well-being. Although, many don't recognize it as such, we are driven by this need for wholeness that can only come from a god who is a spirit.

However, two spirits and their spirit realms are present in our world, and they vie for our allegiance. God and Satan each present themselves as the source who can fill the emptiness of our souls.

One of the spirit sources is good and the other is evil; one produces spiritual and moral light, and the other, only darkness. Jesus confirmed that for us in John 10:10 where He said:

"The thief does not come except in order that he might steal and kill and destroy. I have come so that they might have life and might have it abundantly."

These spirit sources impact every aspect of humanity, i.e. body, soul, and spirit. The affections of our hearts, and our thoughts, emotions, words, and deeds bear the mark of their spirit source.

WORSHIP

We humans must bow to one god or the other as the source whom we trust to make life good for us, and that act is called worship. We cannot refuse to worship, because we were created in a way that compels us to seek help from a spirit source—but we do have a choice.

In the Garden, God Himself was the god who made Adam and Eve complete. Life there demonstrated living under His rule. Obedience was natural to them and they lacked nothing, but Satan came and convinced them that they could be gods unto themselves instead of simply obeying God. Satan is a liar, of course, and his scheme was that he would trick them and would himself become their god. They fell for it and we know the result. Disobedience has consequences—always.

God designed all of creation to glorify Him by declaring His superior splendor, creativity, and power. The intricacy and rhythm of the natural world, including the sun, moon and stars, and the flowers, birds, animals and all else, simply glorify Him by being what they are and doing what they do. But man was created with a free will and glorifies God by choosing Him over Satan as our spirit source in life. Our god.

Please believe the truth that Jesus wants all to hear the Gospel and choose Him as Savior and Lord, and that God would never arbitrarily predestinate some to hell except those who never heard the Gospel, or who refuse it. Calvinist “predestination” teaching disgraces His Name, violates His character, and contradicts His original plan for man that He would be glorified as we choose Him over Satan as our god.

While because of original sin the human spirit was disempowered in its ability to commune with the Spirit of God in a way that leads to Life, it still produces a conscience within us and we are accountable for how we respond. When we are born again then, our spirit is quickened (made alive) and our Life-giving communion with the Father is restored! Without this spirit-presence we would be like other animals.

LAWS, BUT NOT BY THE LAW

All of creation functions by the natural, moral, and spiritual laws that God established before the beginning. Under the Old Covenant the laws governing the relationships between God and man, and man to man, were external and lacked the internal power for man to choose to live by them. Obedience was more from fear than from the heart.

However, Jesus came to fulfill the law (Matthew 5:17-19), and to enable us internally to choose to live by the laws of life. He even gives us a new heart that loves and chooses righteousness!

I revel in the I John 2:7-8 portrayal of the capacity of our new Life!

THE REBELS

You've probably seen young children push away an adult who wants to help them. Even at that age they want to do it themselves.

And why is it that one of their first words is "NO!"? And why do they so quickly and naturally disobey?

Every bit of that demonstrates the fallen nature that we inherit because of Adam and Eve's sin. Their rejection of God's authority is now expressed in the human resistance to all authority. It is "the pride of life" that tells us we can be our own god. That we can decide for ourselves—even determining what is good and what is evil instead of simply obeying God.

That's why we push God's hand away when He touches our shoulder to encourage us to not go back to the buffet or the computer monitor. Jesus came to break that power over us (1 John 3:8). The "Christ in us, the hope of glory" of Colossians 1:27 enables us to live above this broken world.

However, His power cannot be effective in us until we confess both our sins and our sinfulness—our rebellion against His rule over us. Only then are we born again and given entrance through the narrow gate of Matthew 7:13-14 into the Life of the Kingdom of God. Our failure to teach that truth is cowardly and reckless and condemns many to the listless spirituality that often characterizes churchgoers.

BOOKENDS IS ABOUT...

BOOKENDS is about our need to repent of the rebellion that compels us to try to satisfy our soul hunger through things of this world, and to instead live by obedient faith in the Son of God who indwells us—the faith that leads to Abundant Life and fruitful service.

"I have been crucified with Christ, and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. But that which I now live in the flesh, I live in faith that is of the Son of God, the one who loved me and gave himself for me." (Galatians 2:20)

It is about having faith in God and trusting Him to satisfy our deepest inner hunger, making us whole and giving us pur-

pose through the Spirit-to-spirit intimacy that follows our surrender to His Lordship in all of life (Hebrews 11).

This life of obedient faith requires that we abandon all hope of satisfying our soul hunger and finding our fulfillment in anything of this world. We can only be satisfied when we abandon such pursuit and find fulfillment in Him.

Our soul hunger is now fed from God's spirit realm instead of Satan's. Our significance is found in intimacy with Him, and our life purpose and overall fulfillment are in our partnership in His grand plan to bring men and women back to Himself through Jesus. This is BIG!

BUT I FEAR THAT --

I fear that few Christians understand and enjoy the indescribably rich and fulfilling life that accompanies obeying God and setting our minds and hearts on *"things above where Christ is sitting at the right hand of God."* (Colossians 3:1)

It is a life of purpose and meaning, where we live according to the power of His mighty Presence in us that helps us soar above the brokenness of our world, and above the worries and fears that want to capture us. It sets us free from the wounds of the past and the sadness they brought. Earth has no reward that comes even close.

Partnering with God in His magnificent plan to redeem and restore broken men and women, and prepare them for eternity in His glorious Presence, infuses us with purpose, power, and fulfillment that can never be found elsewhere—regardless of what we could gain in the world.

This obedience is out of love, not fear. It opens the doors of heaven's reward now and forever. It is truly other-worldly. It is Life in a different spirit realm.

Such a life is only for those who are truly born again, filled with the Spirit, committed to God's agenda, and yielded to His rule in all of life.

Obedience matters.

See discussion questions on page 22-23.

"ABUNDANT LIFE—REALLY?"

Despite our sometimes-bold declarations otherwise, the ineffectiveness of Christianity in America reveals that we believe pitifully little of what Jesus said about the Life He offers us.

Many American Christians are so blinded by the opportunity of the American Dream that they can't see the superiority of God's Abundant Life. Satan's arsenic-laced candy is so sweet to our flesh that many will keep sucking on it until that opportunity is taken from us by America's financial and/or political downfall. Probably soon. Even then, many will continue to believe Satan's lies because they are so addicted to the belief that they can be their own god.

HOWEVER --

However, for those who would dare to believe, here is some of what Jesus won for us, for now, in our years in this dark world, *if* we surrender to the rule of John 1:1-5 Light of the World—who is not overcome by that darkness. This is not hyperbole.

- The still waters and green pastures of the 23rd Psalm.
- The forgiveness, cleansing, and good conscience of Psalm 32:1-7 and I John 1:9. How sweet is *that* to us?
- God's Psalm 139:7-12 presence even in hard times.
- The Beautiful Attitudes of Matthew 5:3-12 that reveal the Life of the Kingdom of God, even now! Real living!
- Matthew 6:33-34 freedom from all worries about tomorrow as we seek His Kingdom and His righteousness above all else.
- The Matthew 11:28-30 place of safety to flee to, with its peaceful sleep and healthy blood pressure when we are weary.
- Hearing the "well done" of Matthew 25:23 and "come" of v34.
- The exhilaration of John 7:37-39 rivers of living water flowing through us.
- The freedom of John 8:31-32. Free indeed—imagine *that*!

- The love of John 13:34-35 becoming natural to us.
- Doing the works that Jesus did, and greater, as in John 14:12-14.
- John 14:21-23 intimacy with our Creator, as Jesus promised— but with an “if.” *Always* an “if.”
- John 16:33 peace in tribulation. (We’re soon going to need that.)
- The confidence of the “God with me” and “God for me” of Romans 8:28-39, regardless of circumstances.
- The righteousness, peace, and joy (in that order) of Romans 14:17, which is so much more satisfying than what Satan offers.
- The Galatians 5:22-23 Fruit of the Spirit, which makes us happy!
- The trust in God of the Hebrews 11 heroes of faith, which gave them peace even in the most horrific circumstances.

And that’s only part of it!

BUT LET ME ASK – –

Truthfully, how appealing *is* that to you? Did you yawn, or did you shout “Hallelujah” when you read it? Or did you dismiss it as written by one who is “too heavenly minded to be any earthly good”?

Please don’t answer this quickly: *Do* we believe that living according to God’s laws of life is the most fulfilling way to live? Even the only fully satisfying and rewarding way because God made it so?

Or do we secretly believe that we can still indulge in certain compromises that might “miss the mark” of true holiness a little bit, but which we take such pleasure in? That is, certain sins—especially things that “everybody” does?

It is only in believing in and embracing Life in humble surrender to Lord Jesus that we can become fully human as God designed us to be. It is only the poor in spirit of Matthew 5:3—those who know their inability to make life good for themselves and who surrender to Jesus—who can know the true happiness of Spirit-to-spirit relationship with Creator God as His Life flows into them. The Life of the Garden!

See discussion questions on page 22-23.

DO WE BELIEVE?

Do we believe that nothing but nothing outside of intimate communion with Father God can fully satisfy the human soul, because He made it an unbreakable law before He created the world and its inhabitants? Do we believe that the laws of life for humans are as binding as the law of gravity and those that keep the universe spinning.

Satan's darkness tries to hide the Life that we were created to enjoy. Our eyes are blinded by a driving passion to "do it my way," and the facades of much of organized religion serve the devil well. We Anabaptists are no exception to that in spite of our cultural virtues.

It is not only Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, and the Radical left that are false religions! American Christians' sense of entitlement to the opportunities of the American Dream, and our embracing the lie that we deserve such while countless of our brothers and sisters are in desperate need of the basics of life, and billions of souls have never heard of Jesus, is just as dark. (Oh my, did I actually *say* that?)

Our felt need for the comforts of our modern church facilities, even as our I Peter 2:5 spiritual house and I Corinthians 3:16 temple of the living God are in shambles, is revealing.

DECISIONS!

One of the first things we must decide is if we really *want* the life that God offers, or if we prefer to do it our way and slog through the muck and quicksand of Satan's kingdom—hoping to be "good enough" to go to heaven when we die.

Don't we sometimes like to hang on to our anger and bitterness toward those who have wronged us? Something about that is satisfying to our soul in a perverted sort of way, and obeying Jesus in loving and forgiving our enemies would rob us of that satisfaction.

And don't many think that being "responsible" means that we should lay up enough earthly treasure to be sure we always have "enough"?

And we choose to believe the lie that spending another \$10-20,000 on a new vehicle is better than the eternal reward of living more simply and investing it in making God's love known to the nations.

How often *do* we make choices that cost us something—maybe depriving us of some comfort? Or that make us feel financially vulnerable for the future? What sacrifices do we make so that others can hear the Good News of eternal life in Christ?

How much will it be worth to meet those in heaven who come up to us and say, "Thank you for giving so that I could learn about Jesus!"?

CAN HE?

We also need to decide if we even believe that He *can* give us that Life if we choose to enter into His Kingdom through the Matthew 7:13-14 narrow gate. What do our life choices say about that?

Jesus came and boldly plunked His Kingdom down right in the middle of Satan's turf. He planted roses on a manure pile when He canceled the certificate of debt that kept us captive in Satan's kingdom. He disarmed the rulers and authorities and made a public spectacle of them in His death and resurrection (Colossians 2:13-15). Is that not enough to convince us?

His Abundant Life is in His hand extended toward us, but it is conditional on our obedience. It is freely offered to all who humble themselves, repent of their rebellion, and reach out to receive it.

So why do we continue to insist that we know better than He does about what makes life good? Why do we continue to seek our security and fullness in the things of the world that, by God's edict, can never be enough? Is there any better definition of stupidity?

Read Isaiah 55:1-3a and be encouraged!

"Come, everyone who is thirsty, come to the water, and you who have no money, come, buy and eat! Come, buy wine and milk without money and without cost. Why do you weigh out silver for what is not bread, and why do you labor for what does not satisfy? Listen carefully to me and eat what is good, and delight yourselves in fatness. Turn your ears and come to me! Listen, that you may live!"

Yes, turn, and come!

See discussion questions on page 22-23.

THE "EYE" OF OUR HEART

What is the most compelling, driving force in your life today?

Truly, what do you want more than anything else? Please, no pious, spiritual-sounding answers here. Say what it *really* is. You can tell by your joy in anticipating it coming, or sadness in the thought of its loss.

That is the "eye" of your heart that Jesus speaks of.

"For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also. The lamp of the body is the eye. Therefore, if your eye is healthy, your whole body is full of light. But if your eye is evil, your whole body is full of darkness. Therefore, if the light that is in you is darkness, how great is that darkness!" (Matthew 6:21-23)

Our "eye" is what our inner being most longs for and seeks, thinking that it will satisfy our soul hunger. We "set our heart" on that and look to it for identity, security, self-worth, and more. It is compelling. And it sets the direction of our lives.

Regardless of where we're at or what we do, our "eye" determines what we most hope to accomplish in life, and why we do what we do. That is universal to humanity because God made it so.

BORN AGAIN

When we are born again, God literally transfers us into the spirit kingdom where He rules, and we again receive Life from Him as in the Garden. It is called "The Kingdom of God" and is referenced over 150 times in the New Testament. Read Colossians 1:13-14, and shout!

"He rescued us from the authority of the darkness and transferred us to the kingdom of his beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins."

Does that sound as revolutionary to you as it does to me?

The Kingdom of God, His spirit realm on the earth, is the place that God designed for the saints to live. Similar to the Garden of Eden in culture, it is characterized by John 8:31-32 freedom; John 13:34-35 love; Romans 14:17 righteousness, peace, and joy; the Galatians 5:22-23 Fruit of the Spirit; the

Matthew 5:1-12 Beatitudes; a liberating, single-minded focus on worshiping and serving God; and more that we'll cover in upcoming chapters.

All are meant for *today*, and Jesus modeled them and made it possible for us to live that way, but we must believe Him and choose the Life He offers.

Everything changes when our deepest passion and heart longing are for intimacy with Jesus—the intimacy we were created for and without which we will never become fully human. Life takes on a different hue when the most rewarding things we can imagine are to worship Him, and partner with Him in making His Life known to others in ways that are natural to the person we are and the place He gives us in life.

What does the life and culture of the Church in America reveal about what we have set our eyes on?

A COMING DAY

The Abundant Life that is described in the Word can sustain us in the troubled times to come. We can be the “more than conquers” of Romans 8:37 regardless of circumstances.

In that time, and even now, it is the rich Life that Jesus offers that would draw lost and hurting people to Him if we gave Him enough room in our hearts to reveal Himself to them through us.

I fear that in our present state we often give our unsaved friends and neighbors reason to *not* want to be like us. We then judge them as rejecting Him when they are actually rejecting our superficiality and hypocrisy.

And then there's the Day of His glorious return. *“Blessed are those who wash their robes so that they will have the right to the Tree of Life and may enter into the city through the gates.”* Read Revelation 22:12-14 and make your choice!

When will we invite the Holy Spirit to expose our affections that connect us to Satan's darkness, and block the Light for us and for those who need Him—including those whom we say we love? Who will choose to be among the “few” of Matthew 7:14?

What is the eye of your heart? Obedience matters.

See discussion questions on page 22-23.

Elaine and I lived and served in Kenya, Africa, in the 1990s. We alternated between here and there, three months at a time, and every time we came or went we had to adjust to the laws and culture of the kingdom we were in.

For example, in Kenya the steering wheel is on the right, they drive on the left side of the road, and tasteless ugali is a food staple. Money is in shillings, and don't *ever* get caught taking a picture of a policeman.

We accepted all of that as part of living there, but it required an awareness of the differences and a conscious effort to comply. It is exactly the same for those who have been transferred into the Kingdom of God! How aware are we of that? Do you hear that preached?

When we are truly born again, we begin a lifelong process of being transformed by the Romans 12:2 renewing (“renovating”) of our mind, and we will think about much of life differently. Everything changes when we become connected to the Living God and find our identity and life purpose in Him and His Kingdom.

Life in the Kingdom of God is more different than many assume it is.

FOR EXAMPLE:

- The word “investment” typically means putting money into something with the expectation of an increase, but do we most highly value earthly or Kingdom increases? If you invest financially in the work of Global Disciples or Unfolding Word (page 83), they will use those funds to train and equip nationals, who will train and equip others, who will train and equip still others. That “return on investment” will survive any financial collapse and your reward will continue through eternity.
- The word “inheritance” typically means leaving money or other earthly assets for those who follow us, all of which will go “*poof!*” one day, maybe after they have fought over it or it has spoiled them. But what if we

choose to leave behind a legacy of generosity, loving God above all else, and loving our neighbors as ourselves in a way that sets us and our heirs apart unto God and His purposes? That's the inheritance of Colossians 1:12.

- What is our purpose in business? Is it to make money so we can have the things we always wanted, to impress our friends, or to make sure we have "enough" for retirement? Or is it to give as much as we possibly can while living modestly?
- What do we do, or dream of doing, in our retirement? (Whatever *that* is, I'm not sure.) Is it to go motor-homing, playing golf, or traveling the world? Or, to serve somewhere that the knowledge and skills of our years can be applied to helping others come to know Jesus? The opportunities for such humble service are endless and the reward is out of this world.
- Where do we get the idea that what we humbly declare as "God's blessing," may be consumed for our personal comfort and pleasure while billions have never heard the name of Jesus? And when so many of our brothers and sisters in Christ are in poverty? (And it's not just because they're not hard workers like us.)
- When will we embrace a Biblical sense of stewardship as in Luke 19:11-27 and Matthew 25:14-30?
- What is our standard for integrity in business? We don't need a fish logo if our lives and the way we do business are infused with the culture of God's Kingdom.

TOUGH QUESTIONS!

Do we do life in God's Kingdom as a tourist, or as a resident? Do we give ourselves to the laws and culture of our new kingdom, or do we only abide by them when we absolutely must so we don't get in trouble with God or man? Sort of like many of us think of speed limits.

Does our new citizenship override our earthly citizenship and identity and its assumption of accessing the American Dream? Are we willing to live here as Hebrews 11:13 and I Peter 2:11 strangers and pilgrims? Or not?

Do we hear Jesus' strong sayings (expectations) as handicaps to the good life here, or as opening the way to the good life now and forever?

Nothing reveals which spirit realm we most look to for life's satisfactions, more than our attitude toward money and possessions.

God has entrusted to the Christians of America more than enough resources to evangelize the world, but we have squandered them on our own comfort and (supposed) security. Who would deny that the Church in America is spiritually handicapped by a I Timothy 6:6-10 love of money and a I John 2:15-16 love for the world and its things?

Would Jesus tell us that we cannot fulfill the Great Commission until we obey His words in Matthew 6:19-24?

We of the Anabaptist community are particularly at risk because of the capacity that our industriousness, diligence and integrity offer in creating earthly wealth. Would you disagree that the traits that produced spiritual vitality and prosperity of soul in our forebearers, for the sake of the Kingdom of God, are now applied to earthly gain?

A CHANGE IN ESSENTIAL NATURE

Israel was an earthly kingdom of a visible, physical nature much like other nations except that they were God's Chosen People. They were thus marked by His presence as seen in earthly prosperity and in His going to battle for them, among other things.

However, under the New Covenant, God's kingdom was transformed from being "of the earth," to being "of heaven," and the Church was established. The Kingdom of Heaven and the Church are primarily "of spirit" and little about them can be defined in earthly terms.

The presence of God and His blessing is now seen in the character of the Matthew 5:3-12 Beatitudes, Galatians 5:22-23 Fruit of the Spirit, John 17:20-21 Unity of the Church, and in John 13:34-35 Love of the Brethren. That is huge! It is also essential, but rarely taught.

We have a problem in that we often think of the Church in earthly terms and define "blessing" in Old Testament ways, as for Israel.

Was Jesus serious when He said that we must give up everything in order to follow Him? I take that to mean that we must give up our right to hold on to anything and must offer all to Him for His purposes. Consider Luke 14:26-33 and Luke 18:18-30. Nothing I say is a call to poverty—only to New Testament stewardship.

What message do we communicate by the house or shop that we build, or the vehicle or buggy we buy? Aren't they a statement about who we see ourselves to be and how we want others to think of us?

GENEROSITY?

I heard a wealthy man who, when complimented for a \$200,000,000 donation to charity, responded, "My father said its only generosity when it costs you something to give. I still have everything."

Things will change for the billions who have not heard of Jesus, when Christians who are entrusted with abundance view ourselves as stewards who are responsible to invest our resources for the sake of the Kingdom of God. When we view ourselves as privileged to give, rather than privileged to live in what would be luxury for most. And when we view life and what makes it good, through born-again eyes that are set on God and His eternal, spiritual Kingdom versus the earthbound view that we inherited from Adam—and even from the Old Testament model.

Let me hasten to say, though, that the power to make wealth can be a gift in the Body of Christ, and that some of the most humble and godly saints I know are gifted in that way but view themselves as stewards of resources that are entrusted to them for His purposes.

Nevertheless, Deuteronomy 8:17-18 is a powerful word on their need to be alert to the possibility of forgetting that it is God who so gifted them, for His purposes and His glory, and they must be wise to the warning of James 5:1-6.

Jesus won't beg *us* to obey Him any more than He begged the rich young ruler, but He is very clear about the conditions for discipleship. How different would we look if we took those conditions to be as absolute as He meant them to be? Or were they not meant for us?

We're speaking here of a world view that impacts every aspect of life including our attitude toward money and possessions and our definition of "church."

See discussion questions on page 22-23.

Ken Stoltzfus

BY MAN OR BY THE SPIRIT?

I hope that in what you have read so far you've felt the tensions and struggles we have in following Christ. I pray that you have felt a need for help in both your personal battles with Satan's lies and in serving alongside Jesus as He brings others into His Kingdom.

Jesus knew we would need help, and He said this:

"Thus it has been written: The Christ would suffer, and rise up from the dead on the third day, and repentance for forgiveness of sins would be proclaimed in his name to all the nations, beginning from Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things. And I am sending upon you the promise of my Father. But you stay in the city until you put on power from heaven." (Luke 24:46-49)

Did you note His "Go and tell but wait in the city until"? He knew that we couldn't do it without His supernatural power. Holy living and fruitful service are inseparable, and we need His power for both.

PENTECOST

In the Luke record of the Great Commission (above), Jesus defined both the message and the method, and He soon followed with this in Acts 1:8:

"But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses both in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth."

You know what happened then on the Day of Pentecost, and how the disciples were filled with the Holy Spirit to empower the Church for the task we are given. And you know the impact it had on the religious community and others, and that many were drawn to Jesus as He touched people through the apostles' preaching accompanied by signs, wonders, miracles, and healings.

When I read Matthew 11:2-6, Mark 16:15-20, Acts 4:29-30, Acts 14:3, I Corinthians 12:28, and Hebrews 2:4, I find myself daring to believe that God intends that supernatural works of power will naturally accompany the presentation of the Gospel even today.

Why *wouldn't* I believe that?

I hear and read many confirmations of that through people I know and trust, but it is typically in faraway places. Why?

Don't we like to think it is because we don't need those manifestations of power because of our medical resources, evangelistic strategies, educated preachers, advanced spirituality, and more sophisticated society than the "natives" out there? Honestly, don't many think they can help Jesus build His Church without His power?

In I Corinthians 13:8-13 Paul says the gifts, and even knowledge, will cease when the perfect has come and we see Jesus face-to-face, but that hasn't happened yet. Until then, he writes, we are to abide in faith, hope, and love as we continue to carry out our mission in the power of the Spirit through His gifting as it is expressed through sanctified saints.

HOW CAN WE POSSIBLY – –?

How can one possibly argue that we can fulfill the Great Commission and advance the Kingdom of God in the spirit environment that Paul describes in Ephesians 6:10-12, without God's supernatural power?

"For our struggle is not against blood and flesh, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the world-controllers of this darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places."

Phew! That is downright intimidating! Actually, scary. How can *anyone* believe that man's facilities, intellect, belief systems, programs, and strategies can create the setting in which Jesus can build a Church that those supernatural forces of hell cannot withstand?

How well has that worked for us?

Who would deny the proof of Satan's supernatural rule on the earth as displayed in the darkness and evil that captures so many and leads to indescribable bondage, pain, and suffering? And as evidenced in today's horribly divided and ineffective Church, the Body of Christ?

Is there any greater evidence of human arrogance and of how deceptive the devil is, than for us to insist that we can refuse God's supernatural power and deal with Satan with our human resources?

See discussion questions on page 22-23.

“Lord, are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?” (Acts 1:6b)

How could it be that, after walking with Jesus for three years; repeatedly hearing His parables and teachings on the Kingdom of God; witnessing His miracles, which John the Baptist was told were evidence of the arrival of the Kingdom of God; and engaging with Him after His resurrection—the disciples still didn’t get it?

NUMBSKULLS!

But they were clueless. Absolutely clueless even after He had said things like *“My kingdom is not from this world. If my kingdom were from this world, my servants would fight so that I would not be handed over to the Jews. But now my kingdom is not from here”*. (John 18:36)

On top of all that, He had just concluded their final pre-deployment advanced training, as Luke wrote in Acts 1:3, *“appearing to them for 40 days and speaking things concerning the kingdom of God.”* (Where can I buy that DVD set?)

Did you see “concerning the kingdom of God” there? Jesus had just spoken to them about it for 40 days after referring to it innumerable times earlier, but they were still clueless! Numbskulls, we might say!

THEIR CONTEXT FOR UNDERSTANDING

The Jews were actively watching for a Messiah to come and set up an earthly kingdom to free them from Roman rule. That’s what they thought the Triumphal Entry was about. They were looking for an earthly king because they still envisioned a visible Jewish political kingdom. They were hopelessly earthly minded. Church, take note.

Their identity as God’s Chosen People and an earthly nation profoundly influenced how they heard what Jesus said. And their religion was rife with man’s traditions and with organized systems to perpetuate them. Their earth-bound religious identity was set in concrete. Church, take note!

That is the context in which they had heard and interpreted Jesus' extensive teaching on His kingdom, and it distorted everything He said. The concept of a spirit realm and spiritual kingship just didn't fit into their heads. His words were given an earthly meaning because they didn't have a folder to download His spiritual Kingdom of God files into. Again—Church, take note!

EVEN AFTER – –

Think of the many things that Jesus had taught that were radically different from their religious world. He had called them to a life that was different in affections, culture, relationships, and overall conduct—and it stood in stark contrast to their present way of life.

In John 15:1-11 (abiding in the vine), He had laid out a new identity and life source for them, and in the Great Commission and His John 20:21 instruction, *"Just as the Father has sent me, so I send you,"* He had confirmed their new mission in life. And in John 13:34-35 and 15:12-13 He defined love as the new culture for relationships.

He had given them the parables of the Kingdom of Heaven in Matthew 13:44-45, in which the discoverers sold all they had in order to buy those fields. Surely they would understand that something of great value was coming, and something that would cost them much. This was in such contrast to the earthly kingdom they were looking for.

In Matthew 7:13-14 Jesus had identified His kingdom as an exclusive place that one only gets into through the narrow gate of obedience to a new "king," and He confirmed that in v21-23.

How could they possibly still think that this would be an earthly kingdom? But still they asked, "Lord, are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?"

The Kingdom of God is super-natural—above natural, being of spirit and of God and not of man and his mindset, abilities, and rules. It is entirely "other," yet His disciples, the soon-to-be apostles through whom He would launch the Church, totally missed it!

We could never be *that* thick-headed, could we?

See discussion questions on page 22-23.

So what on earth (as we say) happened before the incredible events of Acts 2:5 and on, occurred to launch the Matthew 16:18 Church?

It's simple—they were baptized with (in, with or by) the Holy Spirit, and suddenly, all that Jesus had said, and even all that the Old Testament prophets had said about Him, made sense and they could declare it with clarity, authority, and power. The Spirit who had been *with* them, was now *in* them (John 14:17) and working *through* them!

The Helper promised in John 14:26 had come and was teaching them and bringing to their remembrance all that He had told them. The John 14:21-23 and Colossians 1:27 indwelling Jesus was revealing Himself to them. And the power that Jesus had promised in Acts 1:8 was convincing them and others that it was all for real.

The disciples, the newly minted apostles, “got it”! They now had spiritual minds to understand spiritual things, and spiritual power to do the work of God! Think about that! Whoo-hoo! Church, take note.

Paul writes of that in I Corinthians 1:17-2:16, and in 2:14-15 he concludes:

“But the natural person does not receive the things of the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him, and he is not able to understand them, because they are spiritually discerned. But the spiritual one discerns all things, but he himself is discerned by no one.”

AND THEN CAME THE CHURCH!

The Christian Church, the Matthew 16:18 Body of Christ, was birthed out of repentance and being born again into the Kingdom of God, baptized in the name of Jesus for the forgiveness of sins, and baptized with the Holy Spirit for power for holy living and fruitful service.

All of this happened because Jesus had been exalted to the right hand of the Father and had received from the Father the

gift of the Holy Spirit (Acts 2:33) to establish the Church, His spiritual kingdom on the earth. He would rule this kingdom that would be night-and-day different from any kingdom man had known since Adam and Eve in the Garden.

And note how Peter further defined what this new kingdom was about when he said, *"Be saved from this perverse generation."* (Acts 2:40) This spoke of the transition out of one kingdom and into another, as Paul wrote in Colossians 1:13-14. That's what it means to be sanctified, and II Corinthians 6:14 – 7:1 speaks of it beautifully!

The Church that followed, illustrated how this would look in real life as did the early Anabaptists in very tangible ways. But what about today?

The sequence of repentance, being born again, water baptized, Spirit-baptized, and sanctified was essential to the early Church, and it can be no less so today. It was revolutionary then and it is revolutionary now as Christ and the culture of His kingdom are formed in us, and as "The Church" is expressed in our life together and through us to others.

And hearing this they were pierced in the heart, and they said to Peter and the rest of the apostles, "Men, brothers, what should we do?" Then Peter said to them, "Repent and each of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. For the promise is to you and to your children and to all who are at a distance, as many as the Lord our God may call." And with many other words he testified and urged them, saying, "Be saved from this perverse generation." Therefore, having received his word, they were baptized, and about 3,000 souls were added in that day. And they were continuing in the teaching of the apostles and in fellowship, in the breaking of bread and in prayers. (Acts 2:37-42)

See discussion questions on page 22-23.

Ken Stoltzfus

THE BIBLE SAYS--!

If we are born of water and the Spirit (John 3:5-8), Jesus indwells us and we will do the works that He did! Read John 14:12-14 and believe!

"Truly, truly, I say to you, the one believing in me, the works that I do, he also will do, and he will do greater than these, because I am going to the Father. And whatever you might ask in my name, this I will do so that the Father may be glorified in the Son. If you ask me anything in my name, I will do it."

Yes, Jesus said that, and those works would obviously be performed by supernatural power through us, but His Spirit had not yet been given. Note John 7:37-39:

"The one believing in me, just as the scripture says, 'Rivers of living water will flow from his stomach.' (Now he said this about the Spirit, whom those who had believed in him were about to receive; for the Spirit was not yet, because Jesus had not yet been glorified.)"

And in John 14:16-17, Jesus says this:

"And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Helper so that he may be with you into eternity—the Spirit of Truth whom the world is not able to receive, because it does not see him nor know him. You know him, for he remains with you and will be in you."

Jesus said that His spirit had been *with* them but would soon be *in* them. What a difference! He would receive from the Father the promise of the Holy Spirit and would pour the Spirit out upon His Matthew 16:18 Church to empower them. We are that Church.

THE SUPERNATURAL GIFTS OF THE SPIRIT

Paul instructs us about the supernatural gifts in I Corinthians 12, including v4-10 shown here:

Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit. And there are varieties of ministries, but the same Lord. And there are varieties of workings, but the same God who works all things

in everyone. Now to each one is given the outward display of the Spirit for the collective benefit.

- *For to one is given by the Spirit a word of wisdom,*
- *and to another, a word of knowledge according to the same Spirit;*
- *to another, faith by the same Spirit;*
- *and to another, gifts of healing by that one Spirit;*
- *and to another, workings of power;*
- *to another, prophecy;*
- *to another, discernments of spirits;*
- *to another, kinds of tongues;*
- *and to another, the interpretation of tongues.*

And he continues (v11) with,

But the one and the same Spirit works all these things, distributing them to each one individually just as he desires.

Those are the Holy Spirit empowered tools that God provides to equip His Church to deal with the Ephesians 6:10-12 demonic forces. We don't decide which gift/s are given to us—they are given as He desires.

Paul then goes on (v14-26) to illustrate how those ministry gifts function similarly to parts of the physical body as we carry out the mission Jesus gave us. All are essential, none are superior.

BUT WE ARE IGNORANT OF THIS!

Paul began that chapter with *"Now about the spiritual gifts, brothers, I do not want you to be ignorant"* (v1), but we *are* ignorant. We cannot be effective in fulfilling the Great Commission until we repent of our refusal to believe and teach the whole truth on this topic, receive these gifts among us, and practice them in a God-honoring way. Where are the preachers who so boldly declare that they preach the whole Bible?

Obedience matters.

See discussion questions on page 22-23.

BELIEVING AND RECEIVING

In life, the normal order of things is that we must *believe* something before we can *receive* it and make it our own.

It is so with our actively receiving the gift of salvation, receiving the Baptism of the Holy Spirit and His supernatural gifts, and progressively entering deeper into Abundant Life. Each of these involves belief followed by action.

Read John 3:16 and 18 again and note the significance of the word *believe*. Belief is far more than an intellectual assent. Supposed belief without correspondent action is not belief at all.

But we have a problem with “believing,” because every time we come to the point of “believe and receive” in the things of God, we are faced with internal opposition. The ways of God are spirit in nature and do not make sense to the human rationale that is under Satan’s influence, and our pride in thinking that we can do it our way raises its ugly head. The ways of God are foolish to the old nature that we received because of Adam’s sin. (I Corinthians 2:14-16).

We must humble ourselves and acknowledge our need for a Savior; repent of our sinfulness and turn toward Jesus; believe in and receive His baptism of power for godly living and fruitful service; and then believe that John 10:10 Abundant Life comes by surrendering to His rule and doing things His way in daily life.

Each invitation to believe and receive involves a decision to bow (or not to bow) to God and His ways. And each time, it requires a choice between the Satan-inspired voice of the flesh and the God-inspired voice of His Holy Spirit.

WHAT WOULD HAPPEN IF --?

As said earlier, we receive when we believe to receive. Many who do not walk as Spirit-filled believers have not been taught about the Baptism of the Holy Spirit and His empowerment, thus they haven’t fully opened themselves to His presence and expression in that way.

What would happen if we began teaching that new believers will be baptized with the Holy Spirit and His supernatural power when they repent and are water-baptized, as Peter said on the Day of Pentecost?

*"Repent and each of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit."
(Acts 2:38)*

If we taught the need for true repentance and Spirit-baptism (and very few do teach that), and they believed it, they could be Spirit-baptized when they are water-baptized. They together would represent dying to the old nature and rising to new life in Christ and in His kingdom, and it would revolutionize what we know as "the church."

Is that Biblical? If not, why not, and if so, why don't we teach it?

A PROBLEM

One reason we have so much controversy in the Church over the spiritual gifts is that there's been far too much fleshly (even counterfeit) expression that wouldn't happen if we were properly taught and had surrendered to the rule of Jesus before being baptized with the Holy Spirit. Much shame has been cast upon the Name of Jesus because we in Charismatic and Pentecostal circles have not presented the whole truth on this. (Some might need to chew on that line for a while.)

The operation of the spiritual gifts is only an evidence of spiritual maturity when they function under the rule of Christ and for His purposes. Note that the rebuke of I Corinthians 3:1-4 follows the glowing compliments of 1:5-7!

Those who think they are spiritual because they have the gifts, have forgotten I Corinthians 13:1-2. The Fruit of the Spirit is a trustworthy evidence of maturity, the gifts are not necessarily so.

See discussion questions on page 22-23.

Church, this is serious! Few in America are teaching these truths and it's no wonder that the church as we often know it is so worldly, self-centered, and powerless.

RISKY THINKING

That we are called to Spirit-empowered holiness and mission seems undeniable if we take Jesus and His Word seriously. Is it fair to say that Jesus expects (requires?) that of us? If so, what does it say about the many who are confident of going to heaven when they die but appear to be more interested in the life of the world than that of the Kingdom of God?

I Corinthians 3:11-15's gold, silver and precious stones, versus wood, hay and stubble might seem to speak into that, tempting some to think, "Well, I can enjoy the world now and still get into heaven when I die."

Such thinking, which actually appears to be quite common among churchgoers, misses several points. First is that we deny God the glory He receives when we choose Him and His way over Satan's. Secondly, we arrogantly and ignorantly think that doing life our way is more fulfilling than doing it God's way. And thirdly, our life will lack the traits of God's indwelling Presence that He would use to draw others to Himself. Everyone loses when we think we know better than God.

WHEN?

John the Baptist said that Jesus would baptize us with the Holy Spirit and (refining) fire (Matthew 3:11). Some were thus baptized before water baptism (Acts 10:44-48 and 9:17-18), some at the time of water baptism (Acts 2:38-41), and some after it (Acts 8:12-17, and 19:1-6).

When we are taught; and we believe, surrender to His lordship in holy living and mission, and actively receive the Baptism of His Holy Spirit, His Spirit can flow into and through us in a wonderful new way.

It is often an enlightening experience when we come to believe that the Holy Spirit empowerment of Acts is for today.

Our believing and receiving moment can be, but is not always, a profound spiritual and emotional event because it is spirit in nature and our soul is deeply impacted as we yield further to God's Presence in us.

You can be baptized in the Holy Spirit when you believe and receive. It may be in the context of surrendering yourself to the rule of Christ in all of life, and it is often helpful to take that step while among fellow believers and seekers.

A SERIOUS QUESTION, STRONG WORDS

Now, Paul wrote (Romans 8:9) that if we do not have the Holy Spirit, we are not one of Christ's, which assumes that if we *are* one of His, we *do* have the Holy Spirit, but that brings us to a question that only God can fully answer.

Would you agree or disagree that many (MANY) in today's church appear to have simply prayed the sinner's prayer so they escape hell and go to heaven when they die? That they have never repented and surrendered to the Lordship of Christ; given themselves to holiness and to the mission He entrusted to us; and opened themselves to His Spirit empowerment for both? They might be "saved" but — —!

Institutional religion in America has advanced a low-cost and low-impact form of faith that has little to do with the Matthew 16:18 Church that Jesus is building, and many Christians don't know any better.

There will be a price to pay on "that Day," and I'm thankful that God alone will be the judge.

THE BOTTOM LINE

The core issue of Spirit empowerment and the spiritual gifts is one of surrender to the Lordship of Christ. Let's quit trying to make it about something else in an attempt to justify rejecting them.

Trying to live for Him without this power contributes to the ineffective church we often see today, and wanting His power without first giving ourselves to Him in holiness and mission is just as bad.

See discussion questions on page 22-23.

Jesus modeled a life of spirit empowered holiness and mission, and His Holy Spirit guides and empowers us in living that way too.

We are, without exception, condemned by birth to inherit the captivity that would distance us from Psalm 23's green pastures, quiet waters, and overflowing cup, but Jesus came to set us free.

Jesus was the One who would rescue us from the curse of Adam's sin that condemned us to bondage to Satan's cruel rule and its consequences. (That's what "salvation" means.)

He would fill the emptiness that drove us to every kind of sin in a vain attempt to satisfy the craving for fulfillment—a fulfillment that comes from communion with the Father and which we were created to enjoy, but which cannot be had from any other source.

However, Jesus' establishing the Kingdom of God on the earth, and our entering into the Life of His Kingdom and sharing it with others, are all based on the simple condition of obedience to the Father.

OBEDIENCE MATTERS

Obedience is what set Jesus apart as the Son of God and enabled Him to fulfill the Father's purpose:

- *"You loved righteousness and hated lawlessness. Because of this, God, your God, has anointed you with the oil of exultation more than your companions." (Hebrews 1:9)*
- *"Even though being a son, he learned obedience from the things which he suffered. And having been made perfect, he became, for all those who obey him, the source of eternal salvation." (Hebrews 5:8-9)*

Did you see that conditional "for those who obey Him"? Obedience mattered for Jesus and it matters for us. It aligned Him, and it aligns us with the Father's purposes, plan, power, and fullness, and if *He* needed to learn obedience, how much more do we?

Jesus modeled that obedience, showing us how it works in life and making it possible for us to do likewise. Following Him puts us on the path that results in the Life of His Kingdom, where the essential elements of the Garden are replicated and the Spirit-to-spirit, God-man relationship that we were created for, is restored. But to obey, or not, is always a choice.

MORE LIKE HIM

In I John 2:3-6, John wrote that those who say they abide in Him ought to walk in the same manner that He walked. Here are some of the many ways that we will become more like Jesus as we obey Him and mature spiritually:

- We will serve others rather than lording it over them. (Matthew 20:25-28)
- We will accept others as He has accepted us. (Romans 15:7)
- We will be kind to each other, tender-hearted, and forgiving each other just as God has forgiven us through Christ. (Ephesians 4:32)
- We will embrace His attitudes, as in Philippians 2:3-7.

From John 17:14-23:

- We will be “not of this world.”
- We will see ourselves as being sent into the world, for Him.
- We will live for Him and serve Him together, as one.

It is clear that we are to take Jesus as our example or pattern for life! We can never say we don’t know how we’re supposed to live. And we are to compare ourselves with Him, to see how well we are doing!

Paul wraps that up nicely for us in Ephesians 4:11-16, where He says we are to *“grow up in all things into him who is the head, even Christ.”*

All of this comes as we learn obedience one little step after another, and the more steps we take, the richer and more fruitful our life becomes.

Obedience matters.

See discussion questions on page 22-23.

This Abundant Life of the Kingdom of God, including Spirit-empowered ministry, can only be entered through the narrow gate of Matthew 7:13-14:

“Enter through the narrow gate. For wide is the gate and broad is the road that is leading to destruction, and there are many who are entering through it. For the gate is narrow and the way has been made narrow that is leading to life, and there are few who are finding it.”

Elaine and I could not enjoy the gracious hospitality of the people of Kenya and the blessing of speaking Life to their hungry hearts and open minds, unless we first chose to get on an airliner, leave America, and enter their country.

And only then could we indulge in their year-round fresh fruits and vegetables and delight in the warm climate and spectacular scenery. And oh my, the flowers!

We didn’t start our missionary career until we were 50 years old. Yes, we felt the loss of leaving our growing troupe of grandchildren and the comforts and security of home, but it was a price we cheerfully paid for three months, twice a year, for the rewards that we knew awaited us.

AND LIKEWISE – –

In order to enter the Life of the Kingdom of God we must choose to abandon our search for wholeness in the life of this world—and that choice affects everything about us. Every thing!

It marks us as citizens of His Kingdom in a way that sets us against the world and its lusts; and as Jesus warned, it separates us from many who profess to follow Him but haven’t bowed their wills to Him as Lord and Master.

And further, after we have entered God’s Kingdom we must embrace the path of the cross daily, as He said in Luke 9:23-26:

“Then he said to them all, ‘If anyone wants to come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me. For whoever would desire to save his life will lose it, but

whoever would lose his life for my sake, this one will save it. For what is a man profited, having gained the whole world, but destroying or losing himself? For whoever is ashamed of me and my words, the Son of Man will be ashamed of this one when he comes in his own glory, and of the Father and of the holy angels.”

That is the path of death that leads to Life. It costs us everything, but it is like buying pure gold for a penny an ounce. It is a mystery—the hidden wisdom of God, which if Satan and his minions had understood they wouldn’t have had Christ crucified. Consider I Corinthians 2:7-8:

“Instead, we speak the wisdom of God that has been hidden in a mystery that God predestined before the ages for our glory, which none of the rulers of this age understood, for if they had understood it, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory.”

GOD’S WISDOM IS FOLLY TO MAN

This whole thing is outrageous to the natural mind, as Paul wrote:

“But the natural person does not receive the things of the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him, and he is not able to understand them, because they are spiritually discerned. — — But the spiritual one discerns all things, but he himself is discerned by no one.” (I Corinthians 2:12-15)

Do we believe and teach that entering into Abundant Life through the narrow gate and taking up our cross daily to follow Jesus, is mandatory for His followers; that it is altogether contrary to the natural man; that it is painful to the flesh and puts us at odds with the world and those who love it; that it is a path that must be deliberately and personally chosen by each saint—and that its rewards for now and for eternity far outweigh the cost? Do we believe that?

Jesus had His cross to bear and we have ours, and the principle of endurance as presented in Hebrews 12:1-3 applies to us as well.

Am I correctly interpreting and applying Jesus’ expectations of us? If so, what difference would it make if we believed and taught them? And if not, what am I missing?

See discussion questions on page 22-23.

Ken Stoltzfus

I have a growing awareness that Jesus, the “Christ in me” of Colossians 1:27, wants to reach through me to touch those around me. My hands become His hands, my feet His feet, my voice His voice.

I increasingly sense that it is not just me who wants to do His work. It is Jesus Himself, whose compassion is stirred by needs around me; whose love inspires me to respond; and whose release of power awaits my acting in obedient faith.

As I walk in the Spirit and feel His heart, His desires become mine and I can respond and let Him do His work through me. That is so exciting, but I always have the option of giving myself to my own agenda and allowing my personal bias to govern my response to others.

JESUS' EXAMPLE

Jesus modeled the fruitful life and I want to follow His example. Two of His statements in John 5 stand out to me:

- John 5:19 – *“Truly, truly, I say to you, the Son can do nothing of Himself, unless it is something He sees the Father doing; for whatever the Father does, these things the Son also does in like manner.” (NASB’95)*
- John 5:30 – *“I can do nothing on My own initiative. As I hear, I judge; and My judgment is just, because I do not seek My own will, but the will of Him who sent Me.” (NASB’95)*

Am I, are we, abiding in Christ (John 15:1-11) in a way that we are attuned to the Father’s heart such that we can see what He is doing in the lives of those around us?

Do we, like Jesus, see hungry hearts and open minds in spite of outward appearances? Do we take time to pray and seek discernment about where the Father is working so that we can partner with Him instead of just doing our own good thing through our pre-determined programs?

Jesus didn’t respond to every need around Him, nor can we, but He was in communion with the Father in a way that

the Spirit could show Him where the Father was working and invite Him (Jesus) to partner with Him. We can do likewise—and if we did, it would save us a lot of wasted time, effort and money.

BUT FIRST - -

But first must come the surrender to the Father's will as Jesus says in v30 (above). Until then, we see people through eyes that are biased by our pride, judgment, and personal agenda, and we can't free "Christ in us" to do His work.

This is the life that leads to the outflow of all the Christian virtues and spiritual gifts through us in ways that honor God, make His Name famous, draw others to Him, and make us fulfilled.

TODAY

Honestly, how freely can "Christ in us" do His work through us?

Are we marked by those characteristics, or do we dismiss them as unrealistic for our day? How do we respond to a preacher (or a writer) who says that such traits are essential to Biblical discipleship and were so to the early Church and the Anabaptists, but are sorely lacking today?

This is the Life that would have been preserving salt and guiding light to America if her churchgoers hadn't turned their God-given freedom and opportunity into opportunities to satisfy their earthly lusts by selling their souls to the American Dream.

And to my Anabaptist friends—have we become satisfied with a seemingly pious religious culture that, incidentally, serves us well in our pursuit of earthly treasure?

See discussion questions on page 22-23.

Ken Stoltzfus

THE
MATTHEW 16:18 CHURCH

Jesus set the tone for the Church in Matthew 16:18 when He said, *"I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it."* Did you see, *"My Church"*? And did you feel His power as it storms the gates of hell?

Christians, we are "owned." We are bond-slaves to Another, and we will be engaged in a battle with the powers of hell which, by the way, cannot repel Jesus' invasion into their territory through us.

That gives us identity. It tells us who we are and what we are to be about, and it covers every aspect of life.

As Paul wrote in I Corinthians 6:19-20:

"Or do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit in you, whom you have from God? And you are not your own, for you were bought with a price. Therefore, glorify God in your body."

And Peter, in I Peter 2:9:

"But you are a chosen family, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for possession, so that you might proclaim the praiseworthy actions of the one who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light."

Did you notice "a people for possession" and "so that"?

That is who we are. That is where we get our family name. That is what we are about in life, whether a homemaker, doctor, student, pilot, dock worker, truck driver, entrepreneur, or preacher.

Yes, Jesus was here physically in a human body 2000 years ago, but He is now here by His Spirit in a tangible way as He indwells and works through the believers, who are described as "His body." Read on:

- 1 Corinthians 12:27 – *"Now you are the body of Christ, and each of you is a member of it."*
- Ephesians 1:22-23 – *"And he put all things under his feet and gave him as head over all things to the church, which is his body, the fullness of the one who fills all in all."*
- Ephesians 4:4 – *"There is one body and one Spirit, just as also you were called in one hope of your calling."*

THE MISSIONAL CHURCH

The early Church and the Anabaptists of the 1500s were a missional people. They understood and gave themselves to the mission of building the Kingdom of God on the earth by word and deed.

They lived as they did because it was the life of the spiritual kingdom they envisioned themselves living in, even if it did estrange them from others as Jesus said it would. How can it be, that the church in America is so at ease in our land which is so obviously given over to darkness?

We, His body on the earth today, are sent as He was sent (John 17:18 and 20:21) and are to naturally carry on the work He began. It is simply who we are and what we do. His Presence in us will be seen and felt, speaking life to some and death to others (II Corinthians 2:15-17).

Jesus' assignment was to do His part in the Father redeeming man to Himself, and our assignment is to do *our* part. That compelling vision defined Jesus' time on earth and it can be no less so for us. That is "heavy," but it is the true Church's inescapable assignment.

- Matthew 5:16 – *"Let your light shine before men in such a way so that they might see your good deeds and might glorify your Father who is in the heavens."*
- Ephesians 3:10 – *"So that now through the church the multifaceted wisdom of God might be made known to the rulers and to the authorities in the heavenly places."*

We are to be as much *of* the Light as the world is *of* the darkness. The Kingdom of God, the Kingdom of Light, will be obvious in the world that is ruled by the prince of darkness.

Is it accurate to say that if a local church is not reflecting Jesus in Spirit-empowered holiness and mission in a way that is an affront to the darkness around us, it does not represent the Matthew 16:18 Church that Jesus is building?

See discussion questions on page 22-23.

THE ORGANIZED CHURCH

Those who choose the Father as their god (Chapter 6) become part of the Body of Christ, the spiritual Church. It includes all who live in the Kingdom of God, and it can function with or without structure.

In Luke 17:21, Jesus said that the Kingdom of God is within us. The Church is present wherever a man or woman is operating under His kingship, whether individually or corporately. *“Where two or three are gathered in My Name”* (Matthew 18:20) is an expression of the Church.

It is probable that some organization is needed to facilitate the Church in carrying out its mission. However, organizational structure and systems must be purpose-driven, and the true Church will only assume them to the degree necessary to nurture the saints in their pursuit of holiness and maturity and to facilitate their engagement in mission, individually and together.

The Kingdom of God can be present within an organized church, but is only so to the degree that the various aspects of its life are under His kingship. There can be no assumption that an organized church is the Matthew 16:18 Church just because it functions as a religious entity.

THE BIBLICAL CHURCH

In the Biblical Church, the focus will continually be on Jesus as Lord and Overseer. There will be a greater sense of personal accountability to Him than to men, and the emphasis of teaching/preaching will be more obedience-based for the heart than intellectually based for the head. Increased head knowledge is worthless without application, and will often lead to repentance and heart transformation.

Our awareness of being “about” Jesus and His redemptive purposes will permeate every element of our life together and will be the driving force in decisions about the institution that serves us. The institution and its form, systems, and program are never to be more than a means to our end of living for Jesus and making Him known in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and to the uttermost parts of the earth.

How is that principle reflected in your church budget and program?

THE CHURCH AT WORK

The work of the Church is to advance the Kingdom of God. His Kingdom reflects His rule to the same degree that the world presently reflects the rule of Satan.

God is spirit in nature, and our opposition is also spirit in nature—and powerful. As Paul says in Ephesians 6:12, we are up against *“the rulers, the powers, the world forces of this darkness, the spiritual forces of wickedness in the heavenly places.”*

It is in and through the Church, then, that the I Corinthians 12 supernatural gifts function similarly to a human body, and Paul beautifully describes that as hands, feet, and other parts working together for the common good (v7). They are power tools to do the work we are assigned; otherwise, serving Jesus in building His Church with our human abilities is like building a barn with a handsaw and hammer instead of power tools.

Further, it is in the Church that the five ministry roles of Ephesians 4:11 (apostles*, prophets, evangelists, pastors, and teachers) will operate to build up and oversee the body. Are they?

Our focus on preaching, worship leading, and administration has led to a failure to give place to teachers who are gifted to *“teach them to obey all things that He has commanded,”* as in Matthew 28:20. Church, do we even *want* those who teach as Jesus commanded there?

We are unable to make true disciples because we refuse to call the Church to obey Jesus’ hard sayings—because we fear to upset the apple cart named Lukewarmness.

Since the Church is both invisible and visible, that is, of spirit but also with form, one can function in those gifts and roles either relationally or from a recognized position within an institution. While the body parts are individually appointed or distributed by God (I Corinthians 12:11), it is imperative that they function together, each enriching the other. “Lone Rangers” are dangerous.

*There are those today with the gift of apostleship in terms of being message bearers, and especially in laying down Biblical foundations for us, but there are none who can speak new revelation from God as the original Apostles did.

In I Timothy 3:15 Paul described the Church as the household of God, and Jesus said that we are “family” with Him. *“Who is my mother and who are my brothers? — — Behold, my mother and my brothers! For whoever may do the will of my Father who is in the heavens, he is my brother, and sister, and mother.” (Matthew 12:48-50)*

ONE-ANOTHERING

Jesus commanded us to love one another just as He has loved us (John 15:12), and while love is spirit in nature it will have form in expression.

Because of the default selfishness of our inherited human nature, interpersonal relationships are where the rubber of our professed faith meets the road of life and where our faith can be validated.

The phrase “one another” appears over 100 times in the New Testament, including “love one another” at least 16 times. To love is to give, and we can love because we have been made whole in Christ and no longer need to *get* from others to try to satisfy our soul hunger.

One-anothering includes accepting, honoring, showing preference to, building up, admonishing, exhorting, caring for, serving, forgiving, submitting to, bearing with, teaching, comforting, and many other expressions that characterize us and mark us as Jesus’ followers.

Such one-anothering is essential to authentic Christian community and bears witness to the new Kingdom we profess to be part of.

It is typically true that one-anothering costs us something. We must put others above ourselves. Loving them with the love of Jesus requires that we humbly give ourselves to them in their need. It is far more than a quick and superficial “How are you?”

Churches often talk enthusiastically about one-anothering, but how often is it practiced in life-giving but costly ways in the nitty-gritty of our daily experience? Truthfully, review that

list of scriptural one-anothering actions and consider how many of them you regularly see in practice beyond the “being nice” that is assumed to be part of being a Christian even if it is potentially superficial.

What we are talking about here is the Church that Jesus is building. The one over which He actively rules through His Word and by His Spirit. The one that is mandated to obey Him in loving and caring for one another and will do that naturally, as He would.

We live in a world of broken people. Some are among us in our Church; others are outside of the Church. Some are our co-workers, our neighbors, and even our family members. All are hungry for Life—the Life that we profess to have but which they may not have seen yet in convincing ways.

GOING TO CHURCH – –

Many today are reacting to the highly institutional nature of the organized Church and do not feel the need to “go to church” as they once did. I understand that.

However, it is as the Church family, the Body of Christ, that we encourage one another and help each other along on the journey, and it can occur in both formal and informal settings. I’ve often “done church” over baked oatmeal and one-trip salads, and we can even “have church” with a friend at McDonald’s when the occasion calls for that! We can all be ministers unto each other, and no “Reverend” is needed except Jesus.

We are severely handicapped when our sense of “church” is connected to a building, with the leaders, belief system, program, code of conduct, and budget that the facility represents. We cannot function as a spiritual church family unless our most poignant image of “church” is the relationship between two Jesus followers—which can occur within or outside of the walls of a designated building.

Christian fellowship, either formal or informal, is an important setting for one-anothering in the Church family, and Hebrews 10:24-25 is essential to our well-being.

“And let us consider one another to stimulate love and good deeds, not abandoning our own meeting together, just as is the habit for some people, but exhorting one another, and so much more in as much as you see that day approaching.”

See discussion questions on page 22-23.

Ken Stoltzfus

THE CHURCH IN AMERICA

I honestly don't know how to say this without sounding like I'm condemning today's church. I understand why some might think I am, but I beg you to try to understand. Please!

I don't intend condemnation at all. There's a lot of good happening in our churches, but I am compelled to call us to recognize and acknowledge how badly we are missing the mark of the Matthew 16:18 Church. Jesus set the unchangeable standard for His Church, and we can only fulfill the mission He gave us if we do it His way.

What if I proposed that we are missing the meaning of "The Church" as much as those disciples in Acts 1:6b did? And what if I said that our compelling sense of "Church" is often a visible earthly form just like it was for them, and—forgive me—that our local churches are sometimes more given to building earthly kingdoms than to partnering with Jesus in building His? Look at your budget; "follow the money," as we say.

OUR CONTEXT FOR UNDERSTANDING THE KINGDOM OF GOD

American Christians "hear" Jesus' words in the context of American freedom and prosperity—and the assumptions of the American Dream.

We hear Him in the context of our comfortable facilities, attention-getting technology, exciting programs, and freedom of religion. We might be challenged to rise to a higher level in some way but there is little expectation that we will do so.

Further, we are constantly bombarded by the voice of the dark world around us and by its influence on society, and you can see our loss of spiritual backbone and virtue if you look back even a few years.

We have failed to be salt and light to our nation and will give account to Jesus (Revelation 22:12) for that. We will be without excuse because His teaching and His example were so clear, and He gave us His Holy Spirit to help us understand and obey it.

WE HAVE WORK TO DO!

We are a fractured Church that finds comfort and security in our particular version of “truth” in a way that violates the unity that Jesus prayed for in John 17.

Our leaders tell us what to believe and there is little need for personal study of God’s Word, or for prayer and listening to the Holy Spirit regarding our beliefs, actions, and decisions in life. We value the words of our preachers more than those of Jesus and they are happy with that. If you don’t believe me, try disagreeing with them.

Some “Bible reading and prayer” free us of the requirement to come to Jesus in humble surrender, as He said in John 5:39-40.

Time and money are primary resources for doing God’s work, yet we typically use them much like the world does and we are fine with that. Our giving a little money and time to the church program assures our freedom from an expectation of going all-out for God.

These accepted traits of today’s church shape our understanding of and response to Jesus’ words. And so, the organized church that is an utter failure in being preserving salt and a guiding light to America, and an equal failure in fulfilling the Great Commission even in our Jerusalem, becomes our authority for interpreting and applying Jesus’ words to our life! How can it be?

“And this, knowing the time, that it is already the hour for you to awake from sleep. For now our salvation is nearer than when we believed. The night advanced, and the day has come near. Let us therefore put off the works of the darkness, and let us put on the weapons of the light. Let us walk decently, as in the day, not in drunken celebrations or drunkenness, not in sexual immorality and uncontrolled lust, not in strife and jealousy. But put on the Lord Jesus Christ and make no forethought with regard to desires of the flesh.” (Romans 13:11-14)

See discussion questions on page 22-23.

Would you disagree that most American churchgoers have a greater sense of identity as American citizens who define “the good life” by the benefits of America’s freedom and opportunity, than as citizens of the Kingdom of God who define it by the righteousness, peace and joy that accompanies the radical, Spirit empowered, sanctified, and mission-oriented life that Jesus calls us to?

How *do* we read the Matthew 5:3-12 Beatitudes, for example? Did Jesus give them as practical descriptions of the most rewarding life one could experience? Many who don’t understand the richness of Life in God’s Kingdom view them as “just not practical in real life in this age.” But how about the early Church and the Anabaptists?

GETTING SERIOUS

Please go back to the “Even After – –” section in Chapter 14 and consider how you hear and respond to life in the Kingdom as Jesus described it. Do you and your local church accept all of that as Jesus’ expectations of His followers? Do you have spiritual minds?

It’s important that you sort that out. Invite the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of Jesus, to interpret and apply His words to you, and to us as we function together as the Church.

And how do we interpret and apply these words of His? His Matthew 18:21-35 approach to forgiveness; Matthew 19:23 words about the rich, whom we so honor; Matthew 25:14-30 parable of the talents; and His Matthew 25:1-13 parable of the ten virgins and the need to actively be prepared for His coming? And the Matthew 28:18-20 Great Commission; Luke 9:23-26 requirement of taking up our cross daily; Luke 14:26-35 “count the cost” and v34-35 conclusion; and His instructions in Acts 1:8?

Do we read with a spiritual mind that sees His words as the norm for life in the Kingdom of God and essential to the Christian life, or do we read with the natural mind that is shaped by an earthly perspective of “church”?

JESUS SAID – –

Jesus said some very serious things about our response to His word—His logos, the message He spoke in words and demonstrated in His life—which He requires us to follow. It almost sounds like our obedience is not optional. Consider John 12:47-48 for example:

“And if anyone hears my words but does not keep them, I do not judge him; for I have not come so that I might judge the world, but so that I might save the world. The one rejecting me and not receiving my words has one judging him. The word which I have spoken, this will judge him on the last day.”

What does that mean for us today?

And there's more:

- *“The one having my commandments and keeping them, this is the one loving me, and the one loving me will be loved by my Father, and I will love him and I will show myself to him.” Judas (not Iscariot) said to him, ‘Lord, what has happened that you are about to show yourself to us and not to the world?’ Jesus answered and said to him, ‘If anyone loves me, he will keep my word. And my Father will love him, and we will come to him, and we will make a dwelling place with him. The one not loving me does not keep my words. And the word that you hear is not mine, but of the Father having sent me.’” (John 14:21-24)*
- *“And in this we know that we have known him, if we keep his commandments. The one who says, ‘I know him,’ and is not keeping his commandments is a liar, and the truth is not in this one. But whoever keeps his word, in this one truly the love of God has been perfected. In this we know that we are in him: the one saying he remains in him ought, just as that one walked, also to walk himself.” (1 John 2:3-6)*

Are we willing to look each other in the eye and talk about this?

See discussion questions on page 22-23.

Jesus set the benchmark for His followers in John 13:34-35:

"I give to you a new commandment, so that you would love one another; just as I have loved you, so also you would love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love one for another."

Did you see the word "commandment" there? So, why is love such a big deal? How can it prove that we are His disciples?

It's because the old nature and the new nature are total opposites, and the contrast between them is so vivid! Love is to now shape everything about us, just as sin and selfishness shaped us after the Fall.

Let me explain. Adam and Eve were complete and lacking nothing in the Garden because of their Spirit-to-spirit communion with Father God. His Life flowed into them and made them whole, but after sin and their separation from Him they had an emptiness in their gut that they tried to fill by "getting." You can feel that inside of yourself!

MISSING THE MARK

Every sin, and the pain it produces, is because of our vain attempt to fill that emptiness—which often means taking something from others. Harsh or critical words take their joy; stealing takes their possessions; gossip or lies harm their reputation; control robs them of dignity; greed does not pay workers their fair wages; murder takes the life of another. All "taking," and sin of every kind, are expressions of us trying to fill our inner emptiness. It's not complicated!

By definition, "sin" means "to miss the mark." Our aim is to satisfy our soul hunger, but we miss it every time. Sin cannot satisfy the soul's deep hunger; it always demands more.

When we are born again and brought back into a relationship with Father God through Jesus our Savior, our Spirit-to-spirit interaction with Him is restored, His Life again flows into

us, and our soul hunger is met. We are released from the insatiable need to get, and become increasingly able to give.

TO LOVE IS TO GIVE

To love is to give, as in John 3:16, and the more we become like Jesus through spiritual growth, the more we are able to give. Love is the crowning jewel of the Christian faith. It marks us as His and others will see it and want Him too. That is what Jesus meant in John 13:35! And it only comes when we make Him our god, surrender to His rule, and find our wholeness in Him.

The love of the early Church and of the Anabaptists was far more than having a barn raising, or a fundraiser where we indulge in a feast, or an auction where we overpay. It included loyalty to a brother or sister that compelled one to suffer rather than betray. It fosters a spontaneous desire to respond to the needs of another, which can include giving money, things, words of encouragement, and more—all of which generously and quietly flow from our inner being.

The coming troubles in America will define us in many ways. One will be our willingness to suffer in order to protect another, and I fear that today many Christians would betray their fellow churchgoers in order to protect their jobs, businesses, investments, possessions, or their own lives.

THE COST OF LOVING

In Ephesians 5:1-2 Paul wrote much the same about love as Jesus said. “Therefore, be imitators of God, as beloved children, and walk in love, as also Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, an offering and sacrifice to God for a fragrant aroma.” (John 13:34-35)

Yes, the love that is expressed in giving can require sacrifice. As it did with Jesus, it can cost us something, maybe everything. It is part of the “living sacrifice” of Romans 12:2 where such sacrifice is described as holy and well-pleasing to God and our reasonable service.

Embracing that truth is essential to the life and service that Jesus calls us to. It is a choice that is altogether contrary to the spirit of the world, but it honors the Father and releases His blessing upon us.

A life built around Jesus’ love, mission, and power is the most secure and rewarding way to live.

Obedience matters.

We are born again in a moment, but learning obedience is a lifelong II Corinthians 3:18 process of spiritual growth.

"Now we all, with unveiled face reflecting the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from glory to glory, just as from the Lord, the Spirit."

We must pursue that with diligence, and while it's another whole book, I must say now that the word "transformed" here and in Romans 12:2 comes from the Greek word that we translate as *metamorphosis*.

LIKE A BUTTERFLY

Picture a caterpillar that was once crawling on the ground, becoming a butterfly soaring in the air. That is the process of metamorphosis.

Now imagine yourself gliding in the breeze of the Spirit after being released from the self-centered, unfulfilling junk that you've been crawling in. That's a process for you just as it was for the butterfly!

Imagine being set free from your need to "get" in order to satisfy your inner hunger, and becoming one whose greatest joy is in giving. And giving. Giving time, money, words of encouragement, friendship, a listening ear, a smile to a stranger in Walmart, and more.

God intends that those who choose Him as their god will glorify Him by increasingly living in a way that shows the world the superiority of *His* rule, compared to Satan's. He wants His goodness to be on display in us, to draw others to Himself, as Jesus said in Matthew 5:14-16.

My Elaine's gentle and quiet spirit, and her ability to freely give to others, were a testimony to God's rule in her life and a light to many.

LOOK AT YOURSELF!

It's a sign of strength to acknowledge weakness and areas of need, and active Christ-followers will always have specific

things that they and Jesus are working on together to see His character formed in them.

You can see when metamorphosis has transformed a caterpillar into a butterfly, and we can know when we are being transformed. Do you ever step back and look at yourself in action? It can be humbling, but it can also be exhilarating to realize how He is working in us, little by little, for His glory and our freedom and joy. It's an exciting journey!

As you press into becoming more like Jesus, you can humbly acknowledge areas where His rule in you is increasing, and places where you formerly found satisfaction in fleshly expression but now find joy in righteousness. Thank Him for that and press on!

THE PROOF IS IN THE PUDDING

Love is the most convincing proof of the new nature that we receive when we are born again. Growing into this new nature's natural expression of love is our biggest challenge, and it's a process.

One major area for love's confirmation that we are born again is to love and forgive our enemies—those who work against our best interest. Was Jesus serious in Matthew 5:43-46? That's been a hard one for me sometimes, but I can testify to the sweet reward of obedience and I've come to like that taste better than the bitterness it replaces.

Another is to obey Jesus and love others in a way that compels us to sacrifice something earthly to meet their needs, whether physical, material, or spiritual. It is sometimes said that it's not "generosity" until it costs us something personally. That can be rewarding beyond words.

We see our persecuted and starving brothers and sisters on TV or in a magazine, and close our hearts to them so we can go buy a – – whatever it is that we think we deserve and will make us happy. Maybe fancy tech toys that are quickly outdated, a vehicle with all the bells and whistles that keep malfunctioning, or another investment property that constantly needs to be maintained.

I John 3:16-17 speaks into that context:

"This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us. And we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers and sisters. If anyone has material possessions and sees a brother or sister in need but has no pity on them, how can the love of God be in that person?" (NIV)

Did I say it's a process? Be patient, seek Jesus, and press on!

What expectations would Jesus communicate to us if He was here physically and we said we wanted to be His disciples and follow Him? What if the leaders in your church gave Him the mic?

What would He do if you took Him along on your visit to the hospital or jail and He saw the patients and inmates there? And how would He respond to your church's programs and building plans?

What would He say about the American Dream? Or if He came into your house? Or asked to see your collection? What if you let Him see your checkbook and your tax return? Or gun safe? Or your apps?

How different would our day be if He insisted on walking by our side and sitting with us in our time at home, work, or play?

Would He embarrass you (or would you embarrass Him) if you took Him along on a run through your neighborhood? (I'll bet He could outrun you even if He was wearing a long outfit like He is usually portrayed in.)

What if He asked to go out to dinner with you on the night you were going to the Grand Buffet? Or to the beach? Or on a date night at the movies? Or to watch the Super Bowl?

How about taking Him along when you go to the auto or RV showroom, or gun show, or to a land sale or horse auction?

AND MORE --

If Jesus were here today, would He be doing the same kinds of things He did 2,000 years ago? Would He be healing the sick and setting the captives free? Would He be calling men and women into the Life of His Kingdom and warning them of the seriousness of their choices?

How likely is it that He would call us to separate ourselves from the world and unto Him and to the Father's purposes in the way that He modeled? Or can we fulfill the Great Commission without that?

Would He still be rebuking religious leaders who gave their followers license to love the world if they would simply accept

their church's belief system and put some money in the offering and "be good"?

Would He rebuke your church leaders for what they are telling (or not telling) you?

Bottom line, what would Jesus be saying and doing if He were present on the earth today? Would He be any different now than He was then? If so, when did things change, and why?

Or -- is He here?

SEPARATION

We err if we try to separate ourselves from the world without first giving ourselves to our Lord Jesus. That is mere religion or moral piety. We must first give ourselves to Him, and thus to the holiness and mission that He calls us to, and *that* separates us from the world.

THE WAY FORWARD

A basic need is for us to accept the inner agony of denying the lusts of the flesh that draw us away from godliness. Our refusal to embrace that suffering, along with our failure to receive the Holy Spirit empowerment that would enable us to live godly and serve effectively, has led to a Church that is powerless in the face of the darkness around us. The moral fall of America confirms that, and we haven't seen anything yet.

The fullness of the Spirit is essential to the holiness and mission that all Jesus' followers are called to, and we won't survive in troubled times without it. Few demonstrate that in a Biblical way today. Some deny that the I Corinthians 12 supernatural gifts of the Spirit are for today, and others claim to be filled with the Spirit but their lives contradict their claim. In both cases, it is pride that hinders their opening themselves to the fullness of the Spirit.

Obedience matters.

See discussion questions on page 22-23.

OPPORTUNITY KNOCKS

It is a different Day in history and God is moving in some new and exciting ways that many are not aware of.

Because of the efforts of faithful missionaries of the past two or three centuries, there is now an established Christian presence, with mature and trustworthy leaders, in every region of the world. God is now calling *them* to reach the unreached and least reached in their region, but they are asking us for training and equipping.

We can call that “Church-centric missions” because it centers around Jesus’ global Matthew 16:18 Church that He has been building ever since He spoke those words! Doesn’t that sound like something He would do?!

I invite you to consider these efficient and effective ministries that represent you and me in fulfilling the Great Commission. Visit their websites, subscribe to their free updates, pray, and give!

NEAR-CULTURE DISCIPLE MAKING

God has raised up **Global Disciples** (www.globaldisciples.org) of **Lancaster, Pennsylvania**, to train leaders in established Church networks how to train their people in disciple-making, in starting a small business to support themselves, and in leadership.

The local Church then sends them to a near-culture people group to make disciples and plant a church. And it keeps multiplying from there!

In 2022, Global Disciples partnered with 1,619 clusters of churches who trained 13,530 disciple-makers in 3,135 training programs in 71 countries, resulting in 61,741 new believers in 2,996 new fellowships! Those numbers represent new believers who are actually being disciplined, not just those who raise their hand in a service.

Global Disciples is committed to making disciples who make disciples who obey all that Jesus has commanded them, but they have many more requests for training than they can respond to because of financial constraints.

BIBLE TRANSLATION

Elaine and I supported Bible translation together for 60 years and saw many advances in strategy and technology. In 1963, people like you and us went to a jungle tribe and invested 15-30 years to learn a culture and language before completing a New Testament.

Today, however, God is increasingly working through nationals in the established Matthew 16:18 Church. **Unfolding Word**, of **Orlando, Florida** (www.unfoldingword.org), trains and equips national church network leaders to translate the Scriptures into their own heart language, and *they* then go to the tribes (people groups) and train them.

The result is a well-accepted, high-quality New Testament that is often completed in one to three years at a fraction of the cost!

Unfolding Word was founded in 2017, and God has imparted to them the tools and strategies that are taking translation to a whole new level. They have become the leading influencers in the world of Bible translation, and they deserve our generous prayer and financial support.

TODAY

As God worked in various ways through the centuries in revivals and reformations; in technology like the printing press and computers; and in the Bible translation movement, so He is now bringing the Church-centric strategy alongside traditional methods as part of accelerating the harvest in our day. We are so blessed to be part of that by giving and praying—and certainly for some, going.

Large or small, one-time, or monthly gifts are needed. Give by check, or online by credit card or bank ACH. Visit their websites and support them as they serve us in fulfilling the Great Commission.

QUESTION

What difference would it make for the Matthew 16:18 Church that Jesus is building in hurting and hungry hearts around the world, if we American Christians took Him seriously and viewed ourselves as only stewards of the resources that He entrusted to us?

AFTER WORDS

Thank you for taking the time to read this treatise. You can love me or otherwise, but I believe that this is what Jesus is saying to the Church today. If we are not ready to hear such a message now, we will be soon.

You are probably tempted to think that I think I have it all figured out because of the way I write. I don't, but I do have a high sense of what it means to follow Jesus together as His Matthew 16:18 Church, and I believe that He meant what He said. And I must be obedient to our Father in writing what I sense He is giving me to share with the Church. Please allow me that, and judge *my* words, by *His*.

I'm on a journey, same as you are. I have actively embraced the "more like Jesus" transformation process of II Corinthians 3:18 in my personal life for over 50 years, and will continue to as long as I live. I learn daily—and often through people like you because you certainly have traits of Christ-likeness that still evade me.

I write as one who believes that Ephesians 5:25-27 is not Paul's pipe dream but is from the heart of the Father and describes those who are "in Christ" because they are born again, filled with the Spirit, and committed to a life of holiness and mission in the Body of Christ.

*"As Christ also loved the church and gave himself up for her, so that he might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word, so that he might present the church to himself as glorious, not having stain or wrinkle or any of those things, but so that she might be holy and blameless."
(Ephesians 5:25-27)*

I also write out of a pastor/teacher's view of the Church and a sense of urgency to share what I believe to be Jesus' call to Spirit-empowered life and mission.

If anything sounds prophetic, it's not because I'm a prophet. It's simply because Truth (God's opinion about anything) is itself prophetic. It exposes reality and lays out what follows when action is or is not taken.

TODAY

I see God at work in the hearts of His people. Many are aware that He is up to something but don't know what it is or how to respond. They are hungry for the "more" that they sense is coming but are not sure where to go for the answers.

Well, I don't have the answers, but I believe that they are embedded in the Scriptures. And that they are quite understandable when considered from God's perspective. And that submitting ourselves to Him and His Word is the key to finding the answers. And that God will instruct us as we seek Him together with hearts open to each other.

And I believe that we are approaching a time of shaking in the Church in America, coinciding with major political and economic upheaval. America has crossed nearly irreversible lines of lawlessness and Baal-like worship, and we are self-condemned to judgment.

I have little hope for the restoration of America, and believe that the prayers of the saints must now turn toward the Church and our need for repentance and for God's help to remain faithful to Him and to each other in that time.

And I believe that we will see a great end-time harvest of souls coming to Jesus for Eternal Life, but that much of it will take place outside of today's organized religious institutions—who will maintain their present religious forms as long as they can.

The great harvest will happen through Spirit-empowered saints who are joined to God and His purposes through obedient faith and are bonded to each other as the Church by our mutual connection to Jesus.

As the Church is purified and unified through upcoming troubles, many skeptics and critics who have been watching from the sidelines—including those you have prayed long and hard for—will see that this is for real and will join us in worshiping and serving Jesus. They have not come before because they wanted something more real than what they saw in us, but now they will come! Please believe that.

These will be by far the most glorious days for the Church in America as we turn the eyes of our hearts toward Jesus and His Kingdom instead of pursuing the vanishing American Dream.

But do we even *want* that? Please do! Obedience matters!

CONCLUSION

I may not make the rules for anyone, but God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit *has* made them. And they are important—actually, they are life and death for us now and eternally. If you have read BOOKENDS with an open mind and heart, simply respond to Him as He calls you to. I can't decide for you.

Church, choosing a god has been the most important choice for man since Satan first approached Adam and Eve. It is as important for us today as it was for them in the Garden. It affects everything about everything for us and it impacts those we influence.

Everything in life changes when we embrace Jesus' worldview. It becomes the primary influence in how we interpret and experience relationships, opportunities, challenges, finances, and spirituality.

Very simply, life becomes spirit-based because we are now led by God in a Spirit-to-spirit relationship, instead of by body and soul desires that are influenced by Satan and his world. The spirit realm of the One who created and redeemed us becomes more dominant than the spirit realm of the one who rules this broken world, and that shift begins when we are born again.

We actually become other-worldly in a certain way when our deepest affection and most passionate pursuit are for the Kingdom of God and His righteousness. The things of earth become strangely dim as the Life that we were created for flows into us—and through us to others.

Honestly, Church, how well are we doing, especially in America and the West? Do we love the world in a way that contradicts our profession of following Jesus? Do we look more like it, or like Him? If they hate us, is it for the reasons they hated Him?

WASTED OPPORTUNITY

The United States of America was founded on a Biblical and moral foundation, with a political system that provided unprecedented freedom and opportunity to worship God and to fulfill the Great Commission as we developed our natural resources and world-class technology through free enterprise.

It was all part of God's plan from before creation, and He did it for His purposes. He entrusted to us every resource and opportunity needed to prosper us personally and to take the Gospel to the ends of the earth, but we have allowed that blessing to become our god. We have consumed our resources and opportunities upon ourselves with little regard for Him and those who need Him.

Because of our pursuit of The American Dream, we have failed to be preserving salt and a guiding light to our nation. Many Christians will be angry with God when it collapses—probably soon.

Haven't we cared little about the lost as we gave ourselves to vain pleasures and false securities? Aren't our suffering brothers and sisters out of sight and out of mind? Don't our investments in pets, sports, entertainment, recreation, hobbies, gadgets, housing, costly vehicles, campers, and more reveal our true affections and values?

Don't we trust our wealth managers for "tomorrow" more than we trust God? Don't many of us invest in our 401Ks, CDs, and other Matthew 6:19 forbidden earthly mammon (thank you, King James) that will soon go "poof!", more enthusiastically than investing in extending God's Kingdom to the lost? I understand enterprise enough to know the need for business resources and investments, but these earthly investments are different.

"Mammon" is personal wealth that is trusted, and there is enough of it in the hands of God's people within 50 miles of me to proclaim the Gospel to tens of millions of lost souls. If we cared. If we were obedient to Jesus. It matters—for them and for us. For forever.

We have a reputation for being godly because we are religious in certain outward ways, but don't many use our industrious and thrifty culture for our own ends and egos more than for His intended purposes?

Some are generous; some give a little to charity; others delight in the Old Testament tithe, knowing that they get to keep 90 percent. Those attitudes change when we set our eyes on Jesus and not on the earth and the things of the world. Jesus intends that we are only stewards and never owners; all was given to us for His purposes and His glory.

If we build our house on the Rock, we will be fine when our next and probably severe financial collapse occurs, but many who profess Christ are like children

building sandcastles on their beach of comfort and false security, soon to be washed away by the ocean's next tide.

WHO ARE WE?

Is it possible that we miss the point about the Church that Jesus is building, as badly as the disciples did when they asked if He would now restore Israel as an earthly nation? (Acts 1:6b, chapter 14)

Is our sense of God's Kingdom as much of the earth as theirs was?

Do we look more like His Pre-Pentecost or Post-Pentecost disciples?

Some of us define our spirituality by an institutional church that bears more resemblance to a blend of Old Testament religion and its synagogues, and to corporate-style management, than to the Matthew 16:18 Body of Christ that Jesus is building.

We are surrounded by two spirit realms, and we set our minds on one or the other as the source of Life. Instead of abiding in Christ, have we been abiding far too much in the spirit of the world, and are we unwisely drawing from its resources to try to make life good?

Our use of money, time, personal gifting, relationships, and other resources indicates which spirit kingdom we are most abiding in, and sincere repentance will be confirmed by how we use them.

Each of us has our "thing" where we are most challenged in obeying God. It's easy for me to talk about forbidden mammon because in my early years God graciously imparted to me a disdain for accumulating personal wealth. However, for many years a big thing for me has been an unwillingness to surrender to His expectation of fasting as part of going deeper in following and serving Him.

Other battles of mine include trusting God's justice in the midst of betrayal and injustice. For others, it may be the need to love the unlovely, to forgive, or to embrace another of Jesus' hard sayings.

THE CALL

Church, we have work to do. We have so much to learn about what it means to be obedient to the Father. We have deceived ourselves and have colluded with each other, but we can't deceive Him.

I believe that if Jesus came to our churches in person today, His message would have much the same tone as His letters to the Seven Churches. Most included severe rebuke and warning, and I would expect the same for us. Most of His more complimentary words would be reserved for the suffering Church, whose love for and service to Him puts us to shame.

How different would we be if we obeyed Jesus as He calls us to? If we viewed His commands as just that?

Are we guilty of openly refusing His rule that would be expressed in unabashed and uncompromised surrender to Him, separation from the spirit of the world as we obey His call to holiness, engagement in the work He entrusted to us, and receiving His empowerment for all?

Has a compulsion to be our own god kept us from that?

THE LAST DAYS?

Many think we are in the Last Days because of the growing darkness, but it is the growing Light that convinces me we are.

God is moving in powerful ways that many don't see, preparing for a great Last Days harvest and our Lord's return. He is releasing to trusted servants like Unfolding Word (www.unfoldingword.org) the strategies, systems, and tools to translate Scripture into the remaining languages with greater accuracy, and at a fraction of the time and cost previously. And He is equipping ministries like Global Disciples (www.globaldisciples.org) to help indigenous church leaders make disciples who then make disciples in a near-culture people group. I also say confidently that we will soon see a revival that follows great loss and suffering in our land. It will bring lost and wandering souls in from the fields of sin and from the fringes of the Church, but it will be unseen by many who have sold themselves to institutional religion. Jesus speaks of them in Matthew 13:13-15.

When will we admit that we have not done well? When will we gather to pray and repent, and to receive our Father's forgiveness and cleansing—and a fresh anointing of His Presence to enable us to be about His business in holiness and power?

Obedience matters.

FINAL WORDS...

"Therefore, be alert, for you do not know on what day your Lord will come. But know this, that if the master of the house had known in which watch of night the thief is coming, he would have been alert and would not have allowed his house to be broken into. For this reason you also be ready, for the Son of Man will come at the hour that you do not think." (Matthew 24:42-44)

"And if anyone hears my words but does not keep them, I do not judge him; for I have not come so that I might judge the world, but so that I might save the world. The one rejecting me and not receiving my words has one judging him. The word which I have spoken, this will judge him on the last day. For I did not speak from myself, but the Father himself, having sent me, has given me a command, what I should say and what I should speak." (John 12:47-49)

"And this, knowing the time, that it is already the hour for you to awake from sleep. For now our salvation is nearer than when we believed. The night advanced, and the day has come near. Let us therefore put off the works of the darkness, and let us put on the weapons of the light. Let us walk decently, as in the day, not in drunken celebrations or drunkenness; let us not walk in sexual immorality and uncontrolled lust, not in strife and jealousy. But put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no forethought with regard to desires of the flesh." (Romans 13:11-14)

For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each of us may receive what is due us for the things done while in the body, whether good or bad." (II Corinthians 5:10 NIV)

“For it is the time to begin the judgment with the household of God; but if first with us, what will be the end of the ones disobeying the gospel of God?” (I Peter 4:17)

“All of these things being thus destroyed, of what sort is it necessary for you to be in holy behaviors and godly acts, waiting for and hastening the coming of the day of God, because of which the heavens, being set on fire, will be destroyed, and the elements, being burned up by heat, will be melted? But new heavens and a new earth, according to his promise, we are waiting for, in which righteousness dwells.” (II Peter 3:11-13)

“Let the one who is unrighteous still be unrighteous, and let the morally filthy one still be morally filthy, and let the righteous one still do righteousness, and let the holy one still be holy. Behold, I am coming quickly, and my reward is with me, to pay back each one just as his deeds are. I am the alpha and the omega, the first and the last, the beginning and the end. Blessed are those who wash their robes so that they will have the right to the Tree of Life and may enter into the city through the gates.” (Revelation 22:11-14)

“The one testifying these things says, ‘Yes! I am coming quickly.’ Amen! Come, Lord Jesus!” (Revelation 22:20)

Amen!

Ken Stoltzfus
Kidron, Ohio USA
January 2024

MEET THE AUTHOR



Ken Stoltzfus (Sr.) grew up on a family farm and airport in southeastern Pennsylvania. His father, a pioneer crop duster and aviation entrepreneur, modeled for Ken and his twin Karl a culture of integrity, innovation, excellence, thoughtful risk-taking, and perseverance through difficulty.

Ken and his high school sweetheart Elaine Beiler were married on January 2, 1960, and she partnered with him in pastoral and missionary work, and aviation-related enterprise for nearly 63 years before her passing on September 22, 2022.

God used various circumstances early in Ken's life to invite him to be part of what He was doing in the world, and he and Elaine chose a sometimes-daring life path that included trusting Him as Provider.

In the early 1970s God opened to them the truths of II Corinthians 3:18 transformation, Luke 9:23-26 cross-bearing, Matthew 28:18-20 mission, and Acts 1:8 empowerment. These became foundational in their personal lives, in enterprise, and in 13 years in the pastorate followed by living in Kenya, Africa, half-time in the 1990s where he taught in Bible schools and churches.

He has found that such a vision is welcomed by those who actively serve Jesus as their Lord but can be felt as a threat by those who are satisfied with their spiritual life and don't welcome change.

Ken is an accomplished commercial pilot with many FAA pilot ratings, and is a Certified Flight Instructor, Ground Instructor, and Aviation Mechanic. His father had taught Ken to fly, and Ken taught his three sons and some of his grandchildren.

Somewhat of a visionary, Ken has co-founded numerous ministry and business efforts over the years. He continues to serve God in mentoring relationships, writing, promoting missions, and declaring the Life of the Kingdom of God.

He has nine grandchildren, 13 great-grandsons, one great-granddaughter, and resides in Kidron, Ohio, near many of his family including his remaining son, Mark, and his family.

BOOKENDS A TRUTH THAT MATTERS

BOOKENDS is an invitation into the life that we were created for. The life that naturally follows our being reconnected to the Father, through Jesus.

What if someone told you that He offers us abundant life that is more like the Garden of Eden than most dare to think? And that the little two-letter word “if” is the only thing that stands between you and that abundant life?

BOOKENDS is a bold and passionate portrayal of that life, and a candid treatise on the exclusive path into it through the narrow gate.

Will you keep reading when you realize that “if,” is part of Jesus’ statements like “if you obey my words”?

The author, a retired pastor, missionary, entrepreneur and commercial pilot, loves Jesus and His Matthew 16:18 Church enough to challenge some of our present assumptions—which, he asserts, grow out of our pursuit of the American Dream.

Those who dare to read BOOKENDS will find themselves at various times challenged, affirmed, encouraged and/or convicted through the many scriptures that the author bases his thoughts on.

Revelation

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