

BACK TO CHURCH

A CALL TO THOSE WHO HAVE LEFT **AND** THOSE WHO HAVE STAYED

DISCUSSION GUIDE

WEEKS 1 & 2 (CHAPTERS 1-5): SPIRITUAL MATURITY

We all have different experiences that brought us to sitting together today. How did you come to join the family of God?

When you consider your history with the Church, what is one benefit of the way you came to know Christ and one thing about your experience that might make it more difficult to communicate with other believers?

OUR PURPOSE READ EPHESIANS 4:11-16

What stands out to you in these verses?

How do you define spiritual maturity?

A DEFINITION TO START THE DISCUSSION

When we are moving toward spiritual maturity, the things that happen to us no longer have the power to distract us from our mission as a representative of God's Kingdom.

What would you add to the definition? Why?

What do the verses in Ephesians 4 tell us about spiritual maturity?

PITFALLS ON THE WAY TO SPIRITUAL MATURITY

Do we follow Jesus's example and actively look for those who think differently than we do to share in our God-given mission?

MATURITY IS NOT A TO-DO LIST

READ LUKE 18:18-30

What challenges does this paradox bring to our individual spiritual growth?

In a church setting, what challenge does this paradox bring to our mandate to create disciples?

If you were talking to a new follower of Christ, what would you encourage them to do in order to start on the path to spiritual maturity?

BEHAVIOR, BELIEF, & UNCONDITIONAL LOVE

What are some of the ways that we can love God back unconditionally right now?

LOVING GOD BACK

What has the Church done right in the past few years?

Do you see any areas where the Church could have better reflected the love of God to those outside of the church?

If someone who had left the church was standing in front of you, what would you ask them? What would you say?

If that person is still a believer, but they have become disenchanted with the body of believers, how would you find common ground to begin reopening the path back to Church?



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WEEK 3 (CHAPTERS 6-9): OUR CHANGING LANDSCAPE

READ COLOSSIANS 3:12 & JAMES 1:19-20

What does it mean that our anger does not produce God's righteousness?

LIVING IN A SECULAR SOCIETY

What does living in a secular society mean to you?

What challenges do you see because our society is secular?

What opportunities have you seen because our society is secular?

Does it mean anything if, individually, we have not noticed the opportunities that now exist?

How can we help the people who sit next to us in the seats at church to see these new opportunities?

BIBLICAL INTERPRETATION & ENGAGING CRITICALLY

If you are used to instruction that tells you what you should think and why you should think that way, this approach might feel unsettling. How do you feel right now? Do you have any concerns about this approach?



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WEEK 4 (CHAPTERS 10–11): ADDRESSING THE CHALLENGES (PART 1: PRIDE)

#1 SCIENCE AND SUPERSTITION

Have you had any experiences that were similar to the one that was just read? (page 106)

READ JOHN 13:34–35

If our goal, as stated in John 13:35, is to make disciples, then what does this say about our approach to controversial topics?

What practical steps can we take to ensure that those who are newest to the message of Jesus are able to concentrate on what it means to be a Christ-follower rather than get caught up in the ideals that they need to adopt in order to fit in?

READ 1 CORINTHIANS 9:19–23

How can this influence our approach to communicating with those of another generation?

When someone (inside or outside of the church) wants to start a science v. religion debate, what should our first thought be? How should we respond?

Knowing that post-modern generations prefer to examine issues in terms of gray rather than black and white, if you have a choice of teaching a class to teens or young adults on apologetics, or teaching a class on spiritual growth and the Holy Spirit, which would you choose? Why?

#2 FAILING TO EMPOWER WOMEN

Do you have a story that relates to women in leadership in the church? How have the women in the group been affected by this debate? How have the husbands, sons, and fathers been affected by this debate?

What are some of the ways we can grow in our compassion so that we can understand why others do not see the value in the Church that we see?

WHAT CAN WE DO?

1. **Search our own hearts** to see if there is anywhere we might be harboring superstitions or strongly held beliefs that we use to define our faith.
2. **Ask your pastor** if he or she has any examples of this.
3. When tempted to get into an argument over these issues with someone, **ask yourself whom this serves**. Are you following Jesus's mandate to let our love for each other be the primary witness to our communities?
4. Ask yourself if, when meeting with an unbeliever who wants to talk about religion, do you default to trying to "prove" the basis for your faith, or do you rely on your love for that person, on the Holy Spirit, and on prayer to truly listen and discern what will speak to their heart?
5. If you can see yourself in any of this, **repent**, and remember that true repentance means you make tangible changes in your life.
6. **Give thanks to God** for using us all even though we are not perfect, and for loving us through our mistakes.
7. Go to your favorite social media page and type in **#exvangelical**. You are going to run into a lot of hurt, a lot of anger, and a lot of misinformation. You will find raunchy jokes and a bucket full of the kind of language you do not allow your kids to use. I am hoping that you will also find heartbreak and a whole new group of people to pray for. Please do not respond on the social media platform. You have not earned the right to speak into a stranger's life, and because of this, your words will probably only do more harm than good. Instead, put that energy into doing something positive in your own community.
8. **Listen, Listen, Listen** to your kids when they bring up issues that are important to them. If your kids go to public school, they probably have perspectives on issues that you don't agree with, and you don't even know. Don't panic when you hear these. Instead, pray. Ask God to help your children be a light in a world and ask your kids how you can help them do this.
9. **Ask your kids or your grandkids** what they are already doing to demonstrate God's love for their friends. You might be surprised what you learn. One time when I asked one of my children this, I found out that they had been buying lunch for a kid who couldn't afford it. If your children have Jesus, they are already missionaries—celebrate their work.
10. **Examine your own heart** for the kind of pride that demands that you defend your stance rather than listen to the other perspective.
11. **Do not allow yourself to be offended by ideas**. Relationships matter more than being right.
12. **Ask God to open your eyes** so that you can see where pride is the motivation for being unwilling to consider another's opinion and see another's problems with the same urgency and attention that you see your own.
13. Ask your pastor if you can **teach a kids' class**. Help them to learn that they are all equally gifted as leaders in God's Kingdom and that God has a place for each one of them.
14. **Talk to the youth pastor of your church**. Find out how to pray for our young people. Volunteer.

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WEEK 5 (CHAPTERS 12-14): ADDRESSING THE CHALLENGES (PART 2: GREED)

#3 SECULAR MEASURES FOR SUCCESS

READ 2 CORINTHIANS 4:16-18

Do you think the modern-day Church relies on secular measures for success? Where do you see this?

What challenges does this pose to our witness?

What are some of the successes of your church?

How do you measure success in your personal ministry right now, in the mission God has called you to?

How can you help your pastor be successful by heavenly standards?

If you were speaking with someone who left the church and they mentioned how they see the secular world has invaded the church (the greed evident in the church), how would you respond?

#4 CELEBRITY CULTURE IN THE CHURCH

Where have you seen a celebrity culture in the modern day Church?

What can you do to protect your church from this?

How do we discern what is an expression of our love for God, and what is an expression of our love for our culture?

#5 PROTECTED LEADERS OVER VICTIMS

If you are talking to someone and they bring up abuses that have taken place within the walls of the Church, how should you respond?

What do we say to the women (and men) who have endured extended abuse because of this counsel and possibly even left the Church?

How do we protect our church families from the pain that results from this kind of avoidance?

WHAT CAN WE DO?

1. **Thank your pastors** for their work and for their sacrifices...especially the financial ones. Being satisfied to serve in a community of believers that does not have the monetary resources that the bigger churches have means that your pastors are often committing themselves to working multiple jobs for the privilege of fulfilling their call.
2. If you are part of a big church (or any church) **volunteer, invite people, and find ways to create community** that are based on your shared beliefs. If you are part of a large church because it means that you can belong without serving, then you are there for the wrong reason. Christians serve. It is the hallmark of one who follows Christ.
3. When you look around and see someone missing, take the initiative and **call them yourself**. Don't wait for church leadership. You are the Church.
4. **Protect the Church** by caring for people.
5. If you are in the search for a church home, **look deeper** than the marketing and hype. Watch to see how the pastor interacts with the congregants. Is he or she genuinely interested in the spiritual growth of the individuals under his or her care? Is discipleship the primary focus of the church?
6. **Pray and read the Bible**. Nothing protects us more from being misled than those two things.
7. The next time you are asked to promote something on social media, **consider if your promotion changes anything**. Our culture has tricked us into feeling like promotion is action. It is not. I would challenge you, for every hashtag campaign you share, do something that takes more effort than moving your thumbs. If you share a post about human trafficking, go to the site and donate \$5. If you share a post about your church's event, pick up the phone and personally invite a friend. If you share a quote from the Bible, spend the time to look up the verse and read it in context. The only way we can win the battle against celebrity culture in the church is to do so with authenticity.
8. **Do not diminish another's pain**. Ever.
9. If you become aware of abuse of any kind, **report it**. Abuse is not conflict. When there is conflict in the Church, we follow Matthew 18. Abuse is different. We protect those who are in danger.
10. **Do not assume** that just because someone is from a wealthy or successful family, that allegations of abuse couldn't be true.
11. When you hear someone from outside of the Church talk about abuse in the Church, **be ready to tell them what your church has done to help people be safe**. Talk about practical things like windows in all doors and children's policies that require more than one adult in every room. Work to change the perception that the Church protects their own and build a reputation for protecting the weakest.

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WEEK 6 (CHAPTERS 15–16): ADDRESSING THE CHALLENGES (PART 3: IDOLATRY)

#6 IGNORING THE VOICES

What can we do to make sure that we are growing in empathy instead of becoming increasingly set in our ways?

#7 CHRISTIAN NATIONALISM

Where did you see this dynamic at play in the past few years?

What do you see are the lasting effects of the choices many of us have made regarding what we say and how we say it?

READ ROMANS 12:9–21

What stands out to you in these verses? What speaks to you? What do you need to change?

WHAT CAN WE DO?

1. Purposely **read reports and watch videos** that you think will disagree with your point of view. Do this with the goal of understanding why the person in the report thinks differently than you do. Fight the urge to argue about it, simply see what you can learn.
2. **Read the Gospels.** Meditate on the accounts of Jesus and His interactions with people.
3. **Read or listen to stories** written by people who do not look like you.
4. **Serve** in soup kitchens. Serve the homeless. If Jesus were walking the earth right now, I don't think the first place He would visit would be a gorgeous mega church. Spend time where Jesus would spend time.
5. **Pray for our nation.** Pray for our leaders.
6. **Pray** that the people of God's Church will remember that their biggest witness is not their words, but their actions.
7. When you are about to argue about politics, **pause for a minute** and ask yourself if it hurts or helps your witness.
8. **Be humble** and accept that you do not have all the answers.
9. Learn to be comfortable with choosing to **preserve relationships** rather than being right.



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WEEKS 7 & 8 (CHAPTERS 17-19): HUMILITY

MOTHER TERESA'S 15 SUGGESTIONS FOR HOW TO GROW IN HUMILITY

- Speak as little as possible about yourself.
- Keep busy with your own affairs and not those of others.
- Avoid curiosity.
- Do not interfere in the affairs of others.
- Accept small irritations with good humor.
- Do not dwell on the faults of others.
- Accept censures even if unmerited.
- Give in to the will of others.
- Accept insults and injuries.
- Accept contempt, being forgotten and disregarded.
- Be courteous and delicate even when provoked by someone.
- Do not seek to be admired and loved.
- Do not protect yourself behind your own dignity.
- Give in, in discussions, even when you are right.
- Choose always the more difficult task.

Is there anything in this list that surprises you?

Which ones do you think will be the most difficult to practice?

How would the Church change if we did as Mother Teresa suggests?

FINAL THOUGHTS

Changes I hope to see in the Church:

How I will help make these changes happen:

