

Bay Area Christian Church

The New Frontier

A reflection on the future of the church



By Russ Ewell



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The New Frontier

A reflection on the future of the church

“Through all this upheaval, God’s message spread to new frontiers and attracted more and more people.”

— Acts 12:24 Voice

328B. That is the dorm room number where my life was transformed. I arrived at university as a curious young man who had always asked too many questions. My mother, a teacher, will tell you I started asking “why” so young and so relentlessly that (even though she was an educator) it wore her out.

This curiosity led me to people I saw as great thinkers—Ayn Rand, Fyodor Dostoyevsky, Friedrich Nietzsche. I was searching through their ideas for answers to the unanswered questions I had about life. Questions about how life should be lived. Questions about why the answers I was getting were being proved wrong in the real-world events I observed in daily life.

Every day I wondered, questioned, listened, and learned—and came away with more questions than I started with. In that dorm room, during my sophomore year, I discovered the Bible. The Holy Scriptures had answers I had never heard.

I learned that Jesus was real. He made God real. I learned they were interested in me. They had a vision, a plan, and a destiny for me. I also learned that there was a Holy Spirit that had been active in my life along with God and Jesus—directing, shaping, and inspiring me to find and live a life of purpose. What I had sensed about life began to become clear because this type of thinking introduced me to spirituality, the ability to see more deeply and clearly what life was about, who we are, why we are here.

Perhaps you know that feeling of curiosity I had. Perhaps you are reading this right now with the same unnamed longing I carried into that dorm room—a sense that something is working both inside and outside of your life to lead you somewhere, that your existence means more than the sum of its circumstances. The ancient writer of Ecclesiastes understood this thousands of years before any of us was born:

He has made everything beautiful and appropriate in its time. He has also planted eternity [a sense of divine purpose] in the human heart [a mysterious longing which nothing under the sun can satisfy, except God] — yet man cannot find out (comprehend, grasp) what God has done (His overall plan) from the beginning to the end.

— Ecclesiastes 3:11 AMP

“
They had a vision, a plan, and a destiny for me — and along with the Holy Spirit they had been active in my life directing, shaping, and inspiring me to find and live a life of purpose.

God planted that longing in you. It is not restlessness. It is not dissatisfaction. It is not coincidence. It is his presence calling you toward the purpose of your life. It is him guiding you on the path to your destiny.

In Him also we have received an inheritance [a destiny — we were claimed by God as His own], having been predestined (chosen, appointed beforehand) according to the purpose of Him who works everything in agreement with the counsel and design of His will.

— Ephesians 1:11 AMP

Claimed. Chosen. According to his purpose. This is the active work of God in our lives as an expression of his love. The love of God—manifested in him choosing us—is the answer to not only our spiritual questions but also the loneliness that so many people experience. His love is what eases the pain of loneliness in a way that even our family, friends, and community cannot. His love is behind the transformative purposes of God—the reality that God is actively moving and working in every life, in every generation, to bring things into conformity with his will. His will is the best possible outcome for every person who has ever lived.

Our destiny is not fulfilled by our performance or our compliance with a set of rules, but by our formation. It is fulfilled by allowing God to transform us from the inside out into the people he destined us to be.

John F. Kennedy understood the purposeful inspiration of this type of calling or destiny when he stood before the 1960 Democratic National Convention. He was not offering promises. He was issuing a challenge:

“We stand today on the edge of a New Frontier — a frontier of unknown opportunities and perils — a frontier of unfulfilled hopes and threats.”

— John F. Kennedy, [1960 Democratic Nomination speech](#)

And in his inaugural address, he summoned his generation to the purpose he believed history had placed before them:

“In the long history of the world, only a few generations have been granted the role of defending freedom in its hour of maximum danger. I do not shrink from this responsibility — I welcome it. The energy, the faith, the devotion which we bring to this endeavor will light our country and all who serve it — and the glow from that fire can truly light the world.”

— John F. Kennedy, [1960 Democratic Nomination speech](#)

Kennedy had a sense of destiny and passed it to a nation, not as a form of superficial motivation, but as an inspired responsibility to change the world. We can learn from him and his generational call to purpose.

We live in 2026 in a globalized, interconnected, and yet profoundly lonely world—confusingly moving forward into an unknown future, desperate for clarity about meaning, purpose, and a vision of a better life. This is precisely what God’s church has provided when it has been at its best. Not a political message. Not a cultural institution. A transformation of lives—allowing people of every race, every background, and every country to rise to the occasion of their God-given destiny.

People transformed by God make the world a better place. We do not propose a utopian dream or a set of overly idealized possibilities. Ours is a faith based on the record of Scripture, which testifies through the lives of believers. From Old Testament Israelites to New Testament Christians, the Bible gives us countless examples of what happens when God forms a people and sends them into the world.

We have all these great people around us as examples. Their lives tell us what faith means. So we, too, should run the race that is before us and never quit. We should remove from our lives anything that would slow us down and the sin that so often makes us fall.

— Hebrews 12:1 ERV

God moves. He moves through those who believe in and trust him. He moves to change the world to make it better. Therefore, God is the central focus of our message, not ourselves or our institutions. His message to us is to allow him to work and he will use us to make a better world now, which means we are not meant to simply wait for eternity. We have a purpose to fulfill while we wait.

For the grace of God has appeared that offers salvation to all people. It teaches us to say “No” to ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright and godly lives in this present age, while we wait for the blessed hope — the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ, who gave himself for us to redeem us from all wickedness and to purify for himself a people that are his very own, eager to do what is good.

— Titus 2:11–14 NIV

We must never forget God or what he intentionally plans to do with our lives, whether we are believers now or are considering becoming believers.

Yet after more than forty years as a Christian and in ministry, I have forgotten him countless times—and watched movements rise and forget him as well. I have seen churches filled with people and empty of God. I have sat in rooms [where the Word of the Lord was rare](#)—not because God had stopped speaking, but because the people had stopped listening. Behind it all, one thing has become clear to me: the quiet drift from God-reliance to self-reliance is the most dangerous journey a church, a Christian, or any person can take, precisely because it looks like faithfulness while it is happening.

Here at the Bay Area Christian Church, we take these lessons seriously. The loss of the church’s attractiveness to a world in need and a searching world has little to do with the

aesthetics of services, the inability to adapt to cultural changes, or disillusionment with institutions—though all of these play a role. What lies behind all of them is the forgetting of God.

We lose our desire to serve or do good and fail to produce inspiring lives and church services when we forget God. We fail to adapt to cultural change when we forget God. We lose the trust of the people we are trying to serve or reach when we forget God. And we forget God most reliably when we stop believing that he has a plan and purpose for our lives to make him known and to do good. We stop believing that he and those who walk with him are the timeless answer to every new frontier.

The future of the church brightens when we remember God and rely on him, but it dims when we forget him. Here at the Bay Area Christian Church, it is our choice to remember God, to be and continually become a God-reliant church.

We believe we are not alone. Just as God assured Elijah he had thousands who upheld his cause in 1 Kings 19, we believe there are individual Christians and churches all over the world seeking to walk with God in just this way—not just talking about but living [the spirituality of Jesus](#).

I still have 7000 people in Israel who have never bowed down to Baal or kissed that idol.

— 1 Kings 19:18 ERV

People transformed by God make the world a better place.

In sharing my reflections on the future of the church, I hope to provide encouragement to those who attend church or simply believe in God; those who belong to a spiritual community or are searching for one; those who might be discouraged along with those who are inspired. My hope is that we will each renew our faith in the God of Scripture, who longs to transform our lives so that, like Jesus, we become an expression of his love — transforming the lives of millions by doing good and making him known. The question before every church, every Christian, and every searching soul is not whether the frontier exists. It is whether we have the courage to meet it.

The Great Vulnerability

“The Great Vulnerability” is the universal temptation of human nature to lose God in the midst of life, and the need for us to develop a core belief that we cannot change ourselves or this world without his help.

There is no better example of this challenge and motivation for us to overcome it than Samson, who did not know that the Lord had left him.

Then [Delilah] called, “Samson, the Philistines are upon you!” He awoke from his sleep and thought, “I’ll go out as before and shake myself free.” But he did not know that the



LORD had left him.

— Judges 16:20 NIV

“He did not know.” That is the most haunting phrase in the story of Samson, and it is the most honest description of the spiritual condition I am calling “The Great Vulnerability.” Samson became so preoccupied with the emotional drama of his relationship with Delilah that he lost God. He kept assuming the power he possessed was his own, that he was in control, only to learn what he did not know. He did not know everything in his life was dependent upon God. He didn’t have to see it or know it for it to be true.

Any of us—any Christian, any believer, any seeker, any church—can drift so far from God-reliance that the departure becomes imperceptible. We keep moving, unaware that the power is gone.

Such is the destiny of all who forget God; so perishes the hope of the godless. What they trust in is fragile; what they rely on is a spider’s web. They lean on the web, but it gives way; they cling to it, but it does not hold.

— Job 8:13–15 NIV

Self-reliance feels like control. It feels secure. But it is a spider’s web — intricate and impressive in its construction, yet incapable of bearing the weight of a human soul. Every person and every church that has built on self-reliance rather than God-reliance has eventually discovered this. Not because they lacked talent or sincerity or effort, but because the web was never designed to hold. Only God can hold what God has made.

Does a young woman forget her jewelry, a bride her wedding ornaments? Yet my people have forgotten me, days without number.

— Jeremiah 2:32 NIV

In the above verse, God expresses grief over a forgotten relationship. The most intimate thing a bride possesses—forgotten. Days without number. This is not the picture of a dramatic betrayal, a bride jilting God at the altar. It is something quieter and more devastating than that. It is apathy. The emotionally unavailable unfaithfulness of a love taken for granted—distracted by the latest excitement, bored by the security of being unconditionally loved, or too busy to reach for what was once cherished. Somewhere in the ordinary business of living, the bride stopped showing up.

God is still there. He still wants to walk with us. The walk is still available. But when we forget him, we don’t bother to show up.

I have studied this pattern in the writing of Watchman Nee, whose framework in [The Spiritual Man](#) from 1928 remains one of the most spiritually honest I have encountered. Nee identified what he called “soul-force” —the soul operating from its own energy, talent, and willpower rather than from God’s Spirit. Soul-force can look spiritual. It appears to have no sin. It succeeds where others fail. It serves with apparent devotion. But it is human-powered,

and it exhausts itself. The person running on soul-force needs results to sustain the energy, approval to confirm the direction, and visible success to feel that God is still present.

This is not only the struggle of those who lead. It is the daily spiritual condition of any person who has substituted their own effort for a walk with God—who is working hard at the Christian life without actually relying on the God who gives life ([Galatians 3:1-5](#)).

Are you so foolish? After beginning by means of the Spirit, are you now trying to finish by means of the flesh?

— Galatians 3:3 NIV

I have felt all of this in my own life. It is at the core of every spiritual failure I have experienced. I have watched it in others as well. But spiritual failure need not be fatal.

Even Moses, one of the greatest biblical leaders, faced this spiritual failure. When his people cried out for water, Moses struck the rock ([Numbers 20:11](#)). Not once—twice. The first time, in [Exodus 17](#), was out of obedience; God commanded him to strike it and water came. The second time was out of disobedience; Moses's soul was wearied by decades of leading an impossible people. He struck the rock a second time in frustration rather than following God's instruction to speak. That moment had consequences. But the consequences do not define Moses's story or our own. God does.

And here is what God said about that story at its end:

Since then, no prophet has risen in Israel like Moses, whom the Lord knew face to face.

— Deuteronomy 34:10 NIV

When Moses died, God personally buried him ([Deuteronomy 34:6](#)). Deuteronomy 34:5 literally says that Moses died “with the mouth of the Lord,” but [ancient rabbis read the Hebrew](#) as “with the kiss of the Lord.” That is not the burial of a disgraced failure. That is the honoring of a servant whose work was complete. God did not demote Moses. God graduated him.

Moses had a purpose and fulfilled it. The wilderness required a kind of faithfulness—enduring, steadfast, holding a people together through decades of wandering—that is different from what crossing over requires. God knew when the season was complete.

This is the spiritual truth that too much of the Christianity I have known has missed. Leadership fatigue is real. Walking with God in this world is a struggle. We should not ask whether a person was flawless. We should ask whether they were obedient to the vision from heaven ([Acts 26:19](#)). We should ask whether they were pressing on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of them ([Philippians 3:12](#)). We should ask whether they wrestled with God and kept going, like Jacob at Jabbok—limping, blessed, renamed, and changed ([Genesis 32:24-28](#)). The limp is not disqualification. It is the mark of someone who has genuinely met God and survived. It is formation.

What has gone wrong in some expressions of institutional Christianity is a sociological and theological error about human beings. When any person is placed in the position that only God can occupy—the position of never failing, always knowing, being the source of others’ spiritual life — the collapse is inevitable. There is only one who never fails us, and that is because he alone is love ([1 John 4:8](#)). When we make anyone else that center, we have created an idol. And idols always disappoint, because they were never designed to carry what only God can carry.

For what we preach is not ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord, and ourselves as your servants for Jesus’ sake.

— 2 Corinthians 4:5 NIV

The condition God presents us with is not perfection. It is formation. God is with us when we are with him—allowing him to shape and grow our lives.

The Lord is with you when you are with him. If you seek him, he will be found by you, but if you forsake him, he will forsake you.

— 2 Chronicles 15:2 NIV

The Great Vulnerability is not losing faith in a single dramatic moment. It is the quiet, incremental, days-without-number forgetting that happens when we stop seeking the God who never stops being present. And the antidote is not a better system or a stronger discipline. It is a return.

Unless the Lord builds the house, the builders labor in vain. Unless the Lord watches over the city, the guards stand watch in vain.

— Psalm 127:1 NIV

We are confident that God is able to orchestrate everything to work toward something good and beautiful when we love him and accept his invitation to live according to his plan.

— Romans 8:28 Voice

The failures, the struggles, the seasons of wandering, the struck rocks, the limps—God orchestrates all of it toward something good and beautiful. This is the transformative purposes of God at work in every life that stays oriented toward him, even imperfectly, even haltingly, even with a limp.

Whom have I in heaven but you? And earth has nothing I desire besides you. My flesh and my heart may fail, but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever.

— Psalm 73:25–26 NIV

The Joshua Generation

Don't leave me when I am old and my hair turns gray. Let me tell future generations about your mighty power.

— Psalm 71:18 CEV

The “Joshua Generation” is a biblical idea that entered the public consciousness again with [the presidential campaign of Barack Obama](#). He described the Civil Rights Movement led by Martin Luther King Jr. as the “Moses Generation” and his generation as the “Joshua Generation” that must fulfill the vision of those that came before them.

Obama was correct that in the Bible, the Joshua Generation inherited the vision of the promised land from the Moses Generation—it was their job to take the land and make the vision a reality. In this way, the Joshua Generation had to enter a new frontier.

Here in 2026, we benefit from this example of generational transition. There are many, including myself, who think of the generational handoff as being young to old, but it is important to know that Moses was 120 years old when he handed leadership off to Joshua ([Deuteronomy 34:7](#)).

By the time Joshua inherited leadership, he was no longer a young man. He was likely somewhere between 70-85 years old. For those of us in our fifties, sixties, seventies, and eighties, this means that the call of the New Frontier can belong to us as well as those who are younger. The New Frontier is not a young person's calling. It is a formed person's calling. Formation takes time.

The Moses Generation brought Israel to the edge, but they could not enter. Not because they lacked devotion; Moses was one of the most devoted people in human history. And not because Moses failed to pass something on. Moses taught Joshua how to walk with God in the wilderness, knowing his time would pass.

Inside the Tent of Meeting, the LORD would speak to Moses face to face, as one speaks to a friend. Afterward Moses would return to the camp, but the young man who assisted him, Joshua son of Nun, would remain behind in the Tent of Meeting.

— Exodus 33:11 NLT

Joshua did not inherit an organization. He inherited a walk with God. He had watched Moses speak to God face to face as a friend—and when Moses left the tent, Joshua stayed. That is formation. That is how a walk with God passes from one generation to the next.

There is a lesson here about generational transitions. The danger is not the mistakes or imperfections of the people in the Moses Generation. The danger is when any generation passes on organizational traditions and cultures instead of God—when what gets transferred is the structure of religion rather than the biblical substance of walking with God and building the spiritual relationships that flow from it.

We know it is time for the transition when the Joshua Generation has developed a walk with God as deep as the one they inherited from the Moses Generation. Only then are they ready to cross over into the territory their generation was destined to reach.

After the death of Moses the servant of the Lord, the LORD said to Joshua son of Nun, Moses' aide: "Moses my servant is dead. Now then, you and all these people, get ready to cross the Jordan River into the land I am about to give to them — to the Israelites."

— Joshua 1:1–2 NIV

The Joshua Generation crossed. Not because they were superior people, but because they had watched what happened to a generation that tried to do it in their own strength, and they chose differently. The Moses Generation had seen the promised land. They had seen God part the Red Sea, provide manna in the wilderness, and guide them by a pillar of cloud and fire. And yet when the moment came to cross over, they looked at the giants and saw their own inadequacy rather than God's sufficiency.

Then Caleb silenced the people before Moses and said, "We should go up and take possession of the land, for we can certainly do it." But the men who had gone up with him said, "We can't attack those people; they are stronger than we are." And they spread among the Israelites a bad report about the land they had explored. They said, "The land we explored devours those living in it. All the people we saw there are of great size. We saw the Nephilim there (the descendants of Anak come from the Nephilim). We seemed like grasshoppers in our own eyes, and we looked the same to them."

— Numbers 13:30–33 NIV

Caleb represents the spirit of the Joshua Generation—the person who has learned from the Moses Generation's walk with God and chooses faith over fear, God's sufficiency over human inadequacy. The Moses Generation was not a failure. They fulfilled their destiny. They survived the wilderness. They preserved the people. They passed on a walk with God. But their season was complete and the sobering lesson they left behind was this: even a generation that has seen God move can lose sight of him as their source when the giants appear.

The Joshua Generation had to learn from both the faithfulness and the failure of those who came before. From Moses, they inherited a walk with God—the face-to-face friendship, the Tent of Meeting, and the intimacy that produces genuine formation. From the people, they inherited a warning—that it is possible to witness the miraculous and still default to self-reliance when the moment of crossing demands everything. God must be the source. Not human strength. Not organizational momentum. Not the legacy of what the previous generation built. God himself.

No one will be able to stand against you all the days of your life. As I was with Moses, so I will be with you; I will never leave you nor forsake you. Be strong and courageous, because you will lead these people to inherit the land I swore to their ancestors to give them.

— Joshua 1:5–6 NIV

God's command to Joshua was repeated three times in a single chapter: be strong and courageous. His courage should not come from himself; he should be strong and



courageous because God would be with him wherever he went (Joshua 1:9). The source was God. The strength flowed from the source. The Joshua Generation's destiny was linked to but separate from the Moses Generation's. They were called to take what had been formed in them and cross over into territory the previous generation could not enter—not because the previous generation failed, but because their season was complete and a new frontier required a new generation ready to make God their source all over again.

I think about Jonathan's words—many generations later—in 1 Samuel 14:6, when he was facing a Philistine garrison with only his armor-bearer beside him: “Perhaps the Lord will act in our behalf. Nothing can hinder the Lord from saving, whether by many or by few.” Whether by many or by few. That is God's principle— quality of faith over quantity of forces. The New Frontier is not reached by accumulating enough people. It is reached by developing people formed deeply enough to trust God when the numbers say it cannot be done.

The Bay Area Christian Church can definitely be classified as a megachurch; our attendance is well over the 2,000 that defines that designation. I mention this not to boast but to be clear: what you are reading is not the repositioning of a struggling church trying to justify its decline. We are not moving the goalposts because we cannot score. We are choosing different goalposts because we have read the Scriptures and become convinced that God measures differently than the world does. Rarely on our site or in our conversations will you hear numbers. What you will hear about is lives—because lives are what God counts, and lives transformed by a genuine walk with God are what the New Frontier of the church produces.

What we are building toward as a spiritual community is not the vision of one person but the shared conviction of a people who have read the Scriptures and chosen to build God's way. It is a generation of people whose hearts, souls, minds, and strength— [the four dimensions of the human person](#) that Jesus named in the Great Commandment ([Mark 12:30](#)) —are being genuinely transformed by a walk with God. This is the heart of every Christian, not just those in a particular position. That is the Joshua Generation. That is what the New Frontier requires.

Our hope is that, as your faith continues to grow, our sphere of activity among you will greatly expand, so that we can preach the gospel in the regions beyond you.

— 2 Corinthians 10:15–16 NIV

The regions beyond. That is where God calls every Christian in every generation. Not to consolidate what the last generation built. Not to compete over what already exists. To press into territory that has never been reached — the [invisible continent](#) of the digital world, the generation that has walked away from institutional Christianity, and the people whose lives need the doing good that followers of Jesus are uniquely equipped to provide.

Through all this upheaval, God's message spread to new frontiers and attracted more and more people.

— Acts 12:24 The Voice

God's message is designed to spread to new frontiers. Acts 12:24 is not history. It is a present reality for every person willing to walk with God.



The Frontier of the Heart

Behavior changes actions. Spirituality changes us.

In David McCullough's book [The Pioneers](#), I learned about a man named General Rufus Putnam. He was one of the first settlers of Marietta, Ohio, and also one of the most widely admired. His impact came from his leadership, perseverance, and unflinching strength of character. Putnam's story taught me that what made the physical frontier crossable was not geography or technology. It was the interior life of the people who crossed it.

The most important frontier any person will ever cross is not digital, cultural, or geographic. It is the frontier of the heart. Everything else—every external impact, every organizational accomplishment, every measurable result—flows from what happens on the inside.

This is the truth at the center of 2 Corinthians 3, and it is the scripture I return to more than almost any other when I am trying to understand what genuine spiritual life looks like—for a church, for a Christian, for any person willing to let God in.

You yourselves are our letter, written on our hearts, known and read by everyone. You show that you are Christ's letter, delivered by us, not written with ink but with the Spirit of the living God — not on tablets of stone but on tablets of human hearts.

— 2 Corinthians 3:2-3 CSB

In his letter to the Corinthians, Paul makes a distinction that I believe is the most important distinction in the history of the church: the difference between the letter and the Spirit. The letter (religious rules and human abilities) modifies behavior. The Spirit (God's presence and power within us) transforms the person. These are not two versions of the same thing. They

produce entirely different kinds of people, and they produce entirely different spiritual conditions in a spiritual community. A church built on the letter will produce people who comply. A church built on the Spirit will produce people who are changed. The difference is not organizational. It is interior.

I have seen both. I have been part of both. I can tell you from forty years of experience that you can build an impressive organization on behavioral compliance. You can grow fast. You can have full rooms. You can produce people who say the right things and demonstrate the right behaviors. And you can look at all of it and feel that something essential is missing—the heart. The love.

In my book, [*He's Not Who You Think He Is*](#), I describe the moment the letter had crushed me. It was at this moment that I began to see the problem clearly for the first time. I know I am not alone. Every person who has tried to sustain a walk with God through behavioral compliance eventually reaches that same breaking point—not because they are weak, but because the letter was never designed to carry the weight of a human soul.

It is not that we are competent in ourselves to claim anything as coming from ourselves, but our adequacy is from God. He has made us competent to be ministers of a new covenant, not of the letter, but of the Spirit. For the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life.

— 2 Corinthians 3:5–6 CSB

The letter kills. This is not a metaphor. It is a spiritual reality. People who enter any Christian spiritual community with a behavioral Christianity framework—measuring their standing by compliance, their worth by performance, their relationship with God by how well they keep the rules—will eventually break. Not because the values behind the rules are wrong, but because no human being can sustain letter-based Christianity indefinitely. The letter was never designed to carry that weight.

Jesus named this long before Paul did:

And no one puts new wine into old wineskins. For the old skins would burst from the pressure, spilling the wine and ruining the skins. New wine is stored in new wineskins so that both are preserved.

— Matthew 9:17 NLT

The new wine of the Spirit poured into the old wineskin of behavioral Christianity will always burst. Not because the wine is wrong. Not because the spiritual community failed. Because the container was never designed to hold it. People carry different expectations into a spiritual community—different pictures of what church should look like, feel like, and ask of them. When those expectations do not match what God is actually offering, the friction is real and the pain is real. Though our temptation might be to just critique the wine, we should also examine the wineskin.

The invitation of the New Frontier is not to find a better set of rules. It is to become a new wineskin—to allow God to transform the interior life so completely that it can receive and hold everything the Spirit wants to pour into it. Only a genuine walk with God—a

relationship, not a performance—produces the freedom that Paul says is available wherever the Spirit of the Lord is ([2 Corinthians 3:17](#)).

So put to death and deprive of power the evil longings of your earthly body [with its sensual, self-centered instincts] immorality, impurity, sinful passion, evil desire, and greed, which is [a kind of] idolatry [**because it replaces your devotion to God**].

— Colossians 3:5 AMP

The old wineskin—the letter-driven behavioral Christianity—is not neutral. It is actively formed by the desires Paul names here—sensuality, self-centeredness, and greed. And every one of these desires, Paul says, is a kind of idolatry because each one replaces devotion to God with devotion to something else. The new wineskin is not a better container. It is a person or community of people whose interior lives have been reordered—by the Spirit, through a walk with God—so that devotion to God displaces every competing devotion.

The responsibility for this is shared. Leaders who emphasize behavior over relationship with God contribute to the letter mindset in the people they lead. I own that honestly, and I have been actively working against it since the early 1990s. But at the end of every pastoral effort, each individual person must make their own choice about how they see God. Making God known is our church’s mission precisely because knowing God—not knowing about God, not knowing the rules of God, but truly knowing God—is what changes the spiritual framework from letter to Spirit.

In Matthew 23, Jesus warns against the hypocrisy of the religious leaders (called Pharisees), but his warning is not primarily about hypocrisy in the pejorative sense. It is about the catastrophic spiritual result of living—or leading others—without touching the heart. You can be clean on the outside and empty on the inside. You can be zealous and spiritually empty. The Pharisees were not evil. They were afraid—afraid to examine or engage the heart, their own or those they led, because the heart is the one frontier that cannot be managed from the outside. That fear is the spiritual root of every form of behavioral Christianity.

The alternative is not softer expectations or less commitment. It is what 2 Corinthians 3:18 calls “transformation from glory to glory” —every Christian, with unveiled faces, looking at the glory of the Lord and being changed into the same image:

But we all, with unveiled faces, looking as in a mirror at the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from glory to glory, just as from the Lord, the Spirit.

— 2 Corinthians 3:18 NASB

The Greek word Paul uses for “transform” is “[metamorphoo](#)” — the root of metamorphosis. This is not about improvement. It is about regeneration at the deepest level. It’s not a better version of the person who walked in. It’s a new creation entirely. That is what the transformative purposes of God produce in a person who crosses the frontier of the heart and stays there.

This transformation works through all four dimensions that make up a person, which Jesus named in the Great Commandment ([Mark 12:30](#)): heart, soul, mind, and strength. These are not four separate compartments. They are four integrated dimensions of a human being formed by God. [I have explored this in depth](#) in my [Chemistry Lab](#) series on Deep Spirituality. The formation God produces is not partial. It is whole-person transformation. It is emotional, spiritual, intellectual, and physical. And it is available to every person who is willing to walk with God.

The only thing that counts is faith expressing itself through love.

— Galatians 5:6 NIV

Faith without love is letter Christianity. Faith expressing itself through love is the Spirit giving life. This is the standard: not how well we comply, but how genuinely we love—love for God, love for the people God loves, love expressed in service and sacrifice for something greater than ourselves. This is what Jesus called greatness in his kingdom ([Mark 10:43-45](#)). Not position. Not platform. Loving service.

In his book [The Road to Character](#), David Brooks asks a question that reorients everything: Not “What do I want from the world?” but “What does the world need from me?” I have [explored this question](#) and found it to be the secular expression of what the apostle Paul declared before King Agrippa in [Acts 26:19](#)—that he was not disobedient to the vision from heaven; he would live for God’s purpose for him rather than his own human desires. The person who has crossed the frontier of the heart has made exactly this shift—not from a philosophical place but from a spiritual one. They have stopped asking what they can get from their relationship with God and started asking what God can produce through them for the sake of others. That is not a strategic decision. It is a spiritual transformation. It is the frontier of the heart fully crossed.

As we cross over into the frontier of the heart, God produces in us four qualities: devotion, conviction, vision, and impact. These describe what a genuine disciple looks like—the kind of person formed by a walk with God rather than shaped by religious compliance.

The first of these four is devotion. Devotion is not a feeling or a spiritual discipline but the orientation of the whole person toward God—the interior posture from which everything else in the Christian life flows.

Devotion: The walk with God that turns what was into what is meant to be.

Their leader will be one of their own; their ruler will arise from among them. I will bring him near and he will come close to me — for who is he who will devote himself to be close to me? declares the LORD.

— Jeremiah 30:21 NIV

God himself asks the question: not about who is the most talented, or the most organized, or who produces the most impressive results. God's question is, Who will devote himself to be close to me? That is the question the frontier of the heart answers in every person willing to cross it.

Devotion begins with love. Love is not just sentiment; it is expressed through obedience, trust, humility, and reliance ([Deuteronomy 11:1, 22](#)). When Jesus said "Abide in me" ([John 15:4-5](#)), he was describing the spiritual posture from which everything else flows. When we abide in him, we are connected to him, and thus produce fruit.

During his days on earth, Christ offered prayers and requests with loud cries and tears as his sacrifices to the one who was able to save him from death. He was heard because of his godly devotion.

— Hebrews 5:7 CEB

This is what devotion looks like in the life of Jesus, the most devoted person who ever lived. It was not a quiet sentiment. It was loud cries and tears. It was the whole person—mentally, emotionally, spiritually, and physically—aware of and connected to the Father.

When we follow Jesus's example we do not have a compartmentalized relationship with God but a holistic one. One where God speaks, Jesus reveals, and the Holy Spirit animates our lives. Jesus was heard not because of his performance, not because of his position, but because of his godly devotion. That is the model for us to follow.

This is what the LORD says: "Let not the wise man boast in his wisdom, nor the strong man in his strength, nor the wealthy man in his riches. But let him who boasts boast in this, that he understands and knows Me, that I am the LORD, who exercises loving devotion, justice and righteousness on the earth — for I delight in these things," declares the LORD.

— Jeremiah 9:23–24 BSB

The world's formation system produces people who boast in wisdom, strength, and wealth. These are the world's credentials—the dominant faculty, the institutional achievement, the recognized position. God's formation system produces people who boast in knowing him. That is not a religious cliché. It is the most radical reordering of human identity available—from what you have accomplished to who you know and who knows you.

Greetings from Paul, a servant of God and an apostle of Jesus Christ. I was sent to help God's chosen people have faith and understand the truth that produces a life of devotion to God.

— Titus 1:1 ERV

Faith and understanding produce a life of devotion, not the other way around. Formation precedes devotion. Crossing the frontier of the heart—allowing God to touch and transform the interior life—is what produces the person whose whole life becomes an expression of devotion to God.

The frontier expands in proportion to the depth of the devotion. Wherever we walk with God, our spiritual frontiers will stretch ([Deuteronomy 11:24-25](#)). This is not a promise for one category of person alone. It is a promise for every person who loves God and walks in his ways.

After removing Saul, he made David their king. God testified concerning him: ‘I have found David son of Jesse, a man after my own heart; he will do everything I want him to do.’

— Acts 13:22 NIV

“A man after my own heart.” Not “a man after my standards.” Not “a man after my rules.” A man “after my own heart.”

David crossed the frontier of the heart and lived there. He did it imperfectly, painfully, with real failure and real consequences, but he always returned to God. David was always devoting himself to be close to God. And God’s testimony about him was not about his performance. It was about his heart.

The frontier of the heart is where devotion is developed. And devotion is what every person who follows Jesus is called to—not as a religious duty, but as the natural expression of a heart that has been genuinely touched by God.

The formation crisis: What culture is actually doing to people

You will hear of wars and revolutions on every side, with more rumors of wars to come. Don’t panic or give in to your fears, for **the breaking apart of the world’s systems is destined to happen**. But it won’t yet be the end; it will still be unfolding.

— Matthew 24:6 TPT

The breaking apart of the world’s systems—institutional trust, cultural coherence, the certainties people built their lives on—is not a surprise to God. Jesus saw it coming; it is the unfolding of what he described here in Matthew 24. And his instruction was not to panic. It was to understand what is happening and refuse to be moved by fear.

We are all formed by something. We can choose to be formed by the world’s systems and by fear, or we can choose to be formed by God. That choice will determine our destiny.

I live and minister in Silicon Valley, where the world has most aggressively pursued the idea that technology can solve every human problem. I have watched that experiment run for decades. What I observe is not a more formed culture. It is a more distracted one. People are being formed —formation is always happening, it cannot be stopped—but they are being formed accidentally. By algorithm. By grievance. By the success trap. By ideological echo chambers that confirm what they already believe and rarely challenge who they are

becoming.

... having a form of godliness but denying its power. Have nothing to do with such people.

— 2 Timothy 3:5 NIV

When formation happens accidentally—by the spirit of the current age rather than the Spirit of God—the spiritual result is exactly what Paul warned Timothy about in the above verse: the shape of faith without its power. The structure of a spiritual life without its source. People who look formed but have never been transformed.

Formation is inevitable. The question is whether God forms you, or the culture forms you by default. The question has never been whether formation happens. The question is whether it happens intentionally, by the Spirit of God, or accidentally, by the spirit of the age. And the spirit of the age has a very clear formation agenda:

Do not love this world nor the things it offers you, for when you love the world, you do not have the love of the Father in you. For the world offers only a craving for physical pleasure, a craving for everything we see, and pride in our achievements and possessions. These are not from the Father, but are from this world. And this world is fading away, along with everything that people crave. But anyone who does what pleases God will live forever.

— 1 John 2:15–17 NLT

Craving for physical pleasure. Craving for everything we see. Pride in achievements and possessions. That is the formation curriculum of the spirit of the age. It is being delivered through every screen, every algorithm, and every cultural signal that tells a person what to want, who to be, and what counts as a life well lived. A church that does not offer something deeper and more durable than this agenda has nothing to say to a searching world.

In his book [Identity: Youth and Crisis](#), psychologist Erik Erikson explored the construction of identity through the life of George Bernard Shaw. Through Shaw's life, Erikson identified what every human soul requires to flourish within human limits: a dominant faculty developed through meaningful vocation; a limitless resource of companionship and tradition; and an intelligible theory of the processes of life—which even the old atheist Shaw called a religion. Erikson's framework is remarkable for what it sees. Every human being needs a center of identity, a community of belonging, and a framework for understanding life. He was pointing toward formation without being able to name its ultimate source.

But Erikson's framework stops at the ceiling of human possibility. It describes who we can become through vocation, community, and an intelligible theory of life—within the limits of what human formation can produce. It cannot account for what happens when God enters the equation. It cannot explain the person who was told they would never graduate—and did. Or the person whose family history said dysfunction was their destiny—and broke free. Or the person whose biology said addiction had the last word—and discovered it did not.



These are not the rare exceptions. They are the ongoing testimony of what God does when a person allows spiritual formation to replace secular formation as the source of their identity.

The Apostle Paul understood this distinction from the inside. He had every credential Erikson's framework would count as successful identity formation. He named them all—before declaring them worthless:

I was circumcised when I was eight days old. I am a pure-blooded citizen of Israel and a member of the tribe of Benjamin — a real Hebrew if there ever was one! I was a member of the Pharisees, who demand the strictest obedience to the Jewish law. I was so zealous that I harshly persecuted the church. And as for righteousness, I obeyed the law without fault. I once thought these things were valuable, but now I consider them worthless because of what Christ has done. Yes, everything else is worthless when compared with the infinite value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have discarded everything else, counting it all as garbage, so that I could gain Christ.

— Philippians 3:5–8 NLT

His identity was not constructed from the outside in. It was formed from the inside out by Christ. And here is what that formation produced:

For I am the least of all the apostles. In fact, I'm not even worthy to be called an apostle after the way I persecuted God's church. But whatever I am now, it is all because God poured out his special favor on me — and not without results. For I have worked harder than any of the other apostles; yet it was not I but God who was working through me by his grace.

— 1 Corinthians 15:9–10 NLT

“Whatever I am now, it is all because God poured out his special favor on me.” The NIV renders this as “By the grace of God, **I am what I am.**” It is the personification of God-confidence. I am not a self-constructed identity. I am not the sum of credentials and achievements. I am a person formed by grace into something human formation alone could never have produced.

This is the difference between identity formation and spiritual transformation. Erikson describes identity formation—the best of what human effort and community can produce within human limits. Scripture describes spiritual transformation—the miraculous regeneration that allows people to exceed those limits entirely, or *metamorphoó*, as discussed earlier. A caterpillar does not become a better caterpillar through better formation. It becomes a butterfly — something the caterpillar could never have imagined. That is spiritual transformation. And it is what God produces in every person who crosses the frontier of the heart and stays there.

This is why we cannot simply live according to the culture of the day. Secular formation—however sophisticated, however well-intentioned—limits us to what is humanly possible. It forms us in the image of the age. But spiritual formation has a different destination entirely:

For God knew his people in advance, and he chose them to become like his Son, so that his Son would be the firstborn among many brothers and sisters.

— Romans 8:29 NLT

God chose us to become like his son. He did not choose us to achieve more or become better versions of ourselves. He chose us to be transformed into the image of Christ, and Christ exceeds every human limit. When a spiritual community trades this transformation for mere affiliation— offering membership instead of regeneration, attendance instead of relationship, or organization instead of family—it abandons the very thing the searching soul is hungry for.

Steve Jobs [once said](#),

“It’s really hard to design products by focus groups. A lot of times, people don’t know what they want until you show it to them.”

The same is true of the human soul.

People stop coming to church not because they stop needing what the church carries. They stop coming because the church stops providing what they were hungry for. As Steve Jobs intuited about consumer desire, people cannot tell you they need spiritual transformation. They have never experienced it. They only know that what they have been given has not been enough. The interior life remains untouched. The heart remains unchanged.

Our souls long for formation. We have seen evidence of this for centuries, across cultures. When Paul walked the ground of Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle in Athens ([Acts 17:16-34](#)), he recognized the longing in their philosophy and their altars. He did not condemn it. He named it. God made every culture and every generation so that people might seek him and find him, though he is not far from any of us ([Acts 17:26-27](#)). The ancient Greeks named the formation of a soul “[paideia](#)”—the molding of a person into full humanity through encounter with truth greater than themselves. The German intellectual tradition called it “[Bildung](#)” — becoming fully human through that same encounter of formation.

Jesus did not invent the longing for formation. He provided the only source capable of completing it. A walk with God is not one formation option among many. It is the formation for which every human soul was designed. Jesus identified what every human being needs thousands of years before Erikson pointed toward it. Devotion is the dominant faculty—a way of being in the world rooted in God rather than self. The family of God is the limitless resource of companionship and tradition. Conviction and vision together are the intelligible theory of life. And impact is the result when all three are operating from the right source. But unlike Erikson’s framework, which describes what is possible within human limits, a walk with God opens what is possible beyond them.

Beloved friends, what should be our proper response to God’s marvelous mercies? I encourage you to surrender yourselves to God to be his sacred, living sacrifices. And live in holiness, experiencing all that delights his heart. For this becomes your genuine expression of worship. **Stop imitating the ideals and opinions of the**

culture around you, but be inwardly transformed by the Holy Spirit through a total reformation of how you think. This will empower you to discern God’s will as you live a beautiful life, satisfying and perfect in his eyes.

— Romans 12:1–2 TPT

“Stop imitating the ideals of the culture around you, but be inwardly transformed through a total reformation of how you think.” This is not a call to cultural withdrawal. It is a call to allow God to form you from the inside out so that you are no longer a reaction to your environment but a force within it—bold, loving, and uncompromised.

My message and my preaching were not with wise and persuasive words, but with a demonstration of the Spirit’s power, so that your faith might not rest on human wisdom, but on God’s power.

— 1 Corinthians 2:4–5 NIV

This is what genuine spiritual formation offers that no cultural formation system can match—not persuasive words, not cultural intelligence, not the wisdom of the age, but the demonstration of the Spirit’s power producing faith that rests on God himself. That is what the world that is fading away can never give us and can never take from us.





Without fully understanding it, I was teaching behavioral Christianity rather than the spirituality of Jesus.

The Frontier of Conviction

The walk with God that forms our identity and infuses us with inner strength

You show that you are a letter from Christ, the result of our ministry, written not with ink but with the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone but on tablets of human hearts.

— 2 Corinthians 3:3 NIV

In [Religious Literacy: What Every American Needs to Know—and Doesn't](#), Stephen Prothero argues that Americans are dangerously ignorant of what they and others actually believe, and that this religious illiteracy has serious civic consequences. Over the years, I have come to see how this ignorance also feeds some of our cultural polarization and disrespect, and I have been guilty of it as both a non-believer and a believer.

As a non-believer, I didn't care about religion or Christianity as long as it left me alone. I caricatured what I didn't understand—reducing it to a distorted version of itself rather than engaging with what it actually was. Many who feel compelled to diminish or dismantle Christianity—particularly at the institutional level—often do the same thing: react to a caricature rather than engage with the real thing.

What I did not expect when I became a Christian was that I would create the same problem from the inside.

Conviction is formed inside.

In my early years as a believer and eventually as a ministry leader, I was zealous to make the gospel known. But zeal without formation is its own kind of danger. Without fully understanding it, I was teaching behavioral Christianity rather than the spirituality of Jesus.

Jesus named this interior problem long before I encountered it personally:

He replied, “Isaiah was right when he prophesied about you hypocrites; as it is written: ‘These people honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me.’”

— Mark 7:6 NIV

He went on: “What comes out of a person is what defiles them. For **it is from within, out of a person's heart, that evil thoughts come**—sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, greed, malice, deceit, lewdness, envy, slander,

arrogance and folly. All these evils come from inside and defile a person.”

— Mark 7:20–23 NIV

These verses describe how I lived and taught—looking good on the outside without addressing what was within. I could change how I appeared. I could not change what I desired. I had what Paul warned Timothy about:

... having a form of godliness but denying its power ...

— 2 Timothy 3:5 NIV

Form without power. The distance between the two was exhausting. There came a point where the gap between what I projected and what I actually was became so frustrating I considered walking away entirely. I write about that season honestly in my book [He's Not Who You Think He Is](#). Eventually, I came to understand that the problem was not that Christian life demanded too much. The problem was that I had too little—too little interior formation, too little genuine conviction, too little of what Paul describes as strength in the inner person:

I pray that out of his glorious riches **he may strengthen you with power through his Spirit in your inner being.**

— Ephesians 3:16 NIV

My interior life began to change in a way I didn't expect. While I have had many turning points in my Christian life, none were dramatic spiritual experiences; the most significant ones were ordinary conversations that changed my life.

An older leader—someone I respected and who knew my ministry well—pulled me aside one day. He complimented my effectiveness as a leader. Then, without trying to humble me, he did exactly that.

He told me it wasn't enough to be effective. He said there had to be more to a person than their ability to produce results. He named three people—friends of mine, people I knew well and was close to—and told me what each of them stood for. Not what they had accomplished but what they believed at the core. What you could count on them for when everything else was stripped away. They weren't simply following the leader. They had personal conviction. Then he looked at me and said: “I don't know what you stand for. It isn't enough to follow the person who leads.”

I have thought about that conversation for decades.

What he was telling me was that although I appeared to understand on the outside, I was empty on the inside. I had mistaken competence for conviction. He was inviting me into the frontier of conviction, years before I had the language to name it.

That frontier is the interior world that Dallas Willard and Henri Nouwen spent their lives calling people back to—the hidden formation of the person that no organizational achievement can replicate or replace.

It is the development of deep identity.

Formation produces conviction. Conviction produces identity. And identity—rooted not in performance or position but in who God says we are—is what makes a person strong and immovable:

So, my dear brothers and sisters, **be strong and immovable**. Always work enthusiastically for the Lord, for you know that nothing you do for the Lord is ever useless.

— 1 Corinthians 15:58 NLT

Here is how Scripture describes deep identity formed by conviction:

Faith enabled Moses to choose God's will, for although he was raised as the son of Pharaoh's daughter, **he refused to make that his identity**.

— Hebrews 11:24 TPT

Instead **fully immerse yourselves into the Lord Jesus**, the Anointed One, and don't waste even a moment's thought on your former identity to awaken its selfish desires.

— Romans 13:14 TPT

My old identity has been co-crucified with Christ and no longer lives. And now the essence of this new life is no longer mine, for the Anointed One lives his life through me — we live in union as one.

— Romans 13:14 TPT

Once you had no identity as a people; **now you are God's people**. Once you received no mercy; now you have received God's mercy.

— 1 Peter 2:10 NLT

1 Peter sums it up best: No identity, then God's identity. That is the transformation. That is what conviction produces when it goes deep enough to become who you are rather than what you do.

This conviction does not arrive fully formed. It is developed—through Scripture, through hardship, through the slow and sometimes painful work of allowing God to write on the heart rather than simply inform the mind:

You show that you are a letter from Christ, the result of our ministry, written not with ink but with the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone but on tablets of human hearts.

— 2 Corinthians 3:3 NIV

The noble-hearted Bereans understood this:

Now the Berean Jews were of more noble character than those in Thessalonica, for they received the message with great eagerness and examined the Scriptures every day to see if what Paul said was true.

— Acts 17:11 NIV

I was taught that this passage meant we should safeguard ourselves against the potential fallibility of a human preacher by reading and examining the Scriptures for ourselves. I saw it as a way of checking whether the minister was doctrinally correct. I have come to read it as something richer. The Bereans were building something on the inside. They were developing personal conviction—the internal understanding of God, the depth of faith, the interior strength required to actually live the spirituality of Jesus rather than merely perform it.

And when that conviction is genuine, Paul says it arrives not just with words but with power:

For we know, brothers and sisters loved by God, that he has chosen you, because our gospel came to you not simply with words but also with power, with the Holy Spirit and deep conviction. You know how we lived among you for your sake.

— 1 Thessalonians 1:4–5 NIV

Deep conviction—not shallow agreement or doctrinal familiarity. It's the kind of interior certainty that comes when the Holy Spirit writes something permanently on the human heart.

The writer of Hebrews is direct about the cost of skipping this formation. In Hebrews 5, we learn about those who should be teachers but still need someone to teach them the elementary truths. These teachers have settled for milk when they should be ready for solid food ([Hebrews 5:12–14](#)). I recognize myself in that diagnosis. My capacity to lead was recognized and rewarded before my character, maturity, and spirituality were ready to carry it.

But God does not abandon the unformed. He trains them as a Father:

Have you completely forgotten this word of hope? It speaks to you as a father to his children. It says, “My son, **think of the Lord’s training as important**. Do not lose hope when he corrects you. **The Lord trains the one he loves**. He corrects everyone he accepts as his son.” (Proverbs 3:11–12) Put up with hard times. God uses them to train



you. He is treating you as his children. What children are not trained by their parents?

— Hebrews 12:5–7 NIRV

God does not value perfection or flawless performance, but progress. We are not finished products. We are people constantly under construction, and the measure of success God applies to us as our Father is not whether we have arrived but whether we are growing:

Be diligent in these matters; give yourself wholly to them, **so that everyone may see your progress.**

— 1 Timothy 4:15 NIV

What moves us is not willpower or human accountability. It is our deep and transformative walk with God; it is him writing directly on our human heart, walking together with us as we fulfill our destiny. A [quiet time spent with God](#)—unhurried, honest, attentive—is not merely a religious discipline. It is the place where God creates conviction in us. It is formation happening at the heart level—the only level where it actually changes anything.

What changed me was not a better theology or a stronger effort. It was a willingness—slow, imperfect, and still ongoing—to enter the frontier of conviction.

Every enduring organization values learning, growing, and maturing. The church is a spiritual organization, which means the possibilities for transformation are not merely human; they are supernatural. Though there will always be those committed to caricature and diminishment, the vast majority of people want to see genuine good in the world, and that is exactly what men and women formed by the spirituality of Jesus are uniquely equipped to provide.

Conviction turns fear into faith, and faith expresses itself in love.

One reason believers can do so much good in the world is that conviction is a spiritual quality that makes us blossom under pressure rather than wither in fear. We keep believing, acting, and building because our internal formation is so formidable.

Don't run from tests and hardships, brothers and sisters. As difficult as they are, you will ultimately find joy in them; **if you embrace them, your faith will blossom under pressure** and teach you true patience as you endure. And true patience brought on by endurance will equip you to complete the long journey and cross the finish line — mature, complete, and wanting nothing.

— James 1:2–4 Voice

Conviction is not confidence in ourselves, but in what we have seen God do and who we



know God to be. The Amplified translation of Hebrews 11:1 uses the word “conviction” directly:

Now faith is the assurance (title deed, confirmation) of things hoped for (divinely guaranteed), and the evidence of things not seen — the conviction of their reality — faith comprehends as fact what cannot be experienced by the physical senses.

— Hebrews 11:1 AMP

Faith is the conviction of the reality of things not yet seen. This is not optimism. It is the interior certainty of a person whose soul has been formed by a walk with God.

While conviction helps us see spiritual reality in the midst of physical facts, fear keeps us trapped in physical reality. Conviction and fear are not two emotional states. They are two entirely different modes of spiritual perception. When we cross the frontier of conviction, we decide to look beyond what we can physically see. And what we see changes how we love.

When conviction gives us eyes to see that God is our source—that we are fully known, fully chosen, and fully loved—we no longer need people to fill what only God can fill.

I have learned—at real cost, over decades—that when people are our source of love, we cannot love unconditionally. We will always protect ourselves from those who might not love us back. Our life will be shaped by who might accept or reject us. We begin to live a life of self-preservation.

But when God is our source, the ceiling on our love is removed. We can love without calculating the risk or return because we are no longer drawing from a supply that runs out. We can serve without self-protection. We can tell the truth without rehearsing the response. This is what conviction produces in every person who has fully experienced the love of God.

... What is important is faith expressing itself in love.

— Galatians 5:6 NLT

Such love has no fear, because perfect love expels all fear. If we are afraid, it is for fear of punishment, and this shows that we have not fully experienced his perfect love. We love each other because he loved us first.

— 1 John 4:18–19 NLT

Faith is how we access the full experience of God’s love. Faith produces the capacity to love others. Faith produces the fearlessness of love—not from our own supply, which runs dry, but from his, which does not. This is the breakthrough. This is what conviction looks like when it is produced by a walk with God. And this is why the frontier of conviction is not primarily about beliefs we hold. It is about love we give—love made possible because we have been loved first.



He has told you, O man, what is good; And what does the LORD require of you Except to be just, and to love [and to diligently practice] kindness (compassion), And **to walk humbly with your God** [setting aside any overblown sense of importance or self-righteousness]?

— Micah 6:8 AMP

“Walk humbly.” The bracketed addition in the Amplified translation is the spiritual condition reality check: trying to have conviction without humility leads to self-righteousness.

“Setting aside any overblown sense of importance” is the interior posture that a walk with God produces in every person who crosses the frontier of conviction. It is the freedom of a soul that no longer needs to be the most important person in the room because its security comes from God. And from that posture, every person can make Joshua’s declaration their own:

“... But as for me and my household, we will serve the LORD.”

— Joshua 24:15 NIV

Joshua led the Israelites into the promised land, and his life demonstrates the unique and powerful impact of humility before God: the absence of insecurity. When each of us makes Joshua’s choice to serve God, we are experiencing the power of conviction in our lives that allows us to successfully navigate the New Frontier.



The Frontier of Vision

The walk with God that transforms lives from ordinary to extraordinary

Where there is no vision, the people perish: but he that keepeth the law, happy is he.

— Proverbs 29:18 KJV

Between the ages of eight and ten, I would wait at the bus stop and think about the future. I was a quiet kid, the only boy in my family in a neighborhood where most of the other children were older than me. I was not socially skilled. I didn't engage much, but I watched. I imagined.

My favorite television show was called [Space 1999](#), which was about "the faraway future" of the 1990s, where humans lived on the moon.

It seems comical in 2026, but as I stood at that bus stop, my favorite show sparked my imagination over who I would become by then. I wanted to be a

scientist. I thought I might become like [First Officer Spock from Star Trek](#)—logical, disciplined, capable of understanding and discovering things ordinary humans could not.

Somewhere in those quiet years, I also had a vision of God. Not a religious vision. A personal one, as I wrote about in my book, [He's Not Who You Think He Is](#): “My earliest impressions of God are from a dream I had. In this dream, God was a big kid, wearing a striped T-shirt. God was my playmate, friend, and big brother. He was the older kid who became like a little kid to hang with his younger brother. I liked this view of God, but it has been a difficult one to sustain.”

How I saw God as a child was simple: he was on my side, supportive, wanting good things for me. The view was incomplete, but it was real. And it kept something alive in me that life and the world would spend years trying to extinguish.

The childlike imagination—the ability to see possibility before problems, to perceive what could be before being overwhelmed by what is—is not naivety to be outgrown. It is the very capacity for vision that God designed into every human soul.

Jesus understood why this matters. When his disciples tried to keep children away from him, Jesus stopped them. He was teaching them something about themselves and about all people— that vision is something to be protected, not managed. That God’s kingdom belongs to those who guard this capacity rather than surrender it to the weight of the world:

But Jesus said, “Let the children come to me. Don’t stop them! For the Kingdom of Heaven belongs to those who are like these children.”

— Matthew 19:14 NLT

Children think in terms of future possibilities rather than present realities. This is imagination, and in my view, imagination is spiritual thinking produced by faith.

As adults, we lose this when we experience the inevitable suffering of life, becoming so focused on problems, overwhelmed by troubles, and loaded down with despair that we find our vision extinguished. We can even experience this as children. I know I did. But hope always seemed to reappear. My family, my friends, and my environment did not snuff out my vision. Even when kids made fun of the size of my head—they often called me the Astrodome—and my bespectacled, quiet, bookish look, they eventually started calling me something else. They called me The Professor. They gave me a vision despite the jokes. Nurture, they say, can [overcome the limits of nature](#). And despite my insecure, introverted fear of speaking my thoughts, my vision grew as it was nurtured by these influences.

One of these ways my vision grew was when a friend said I could be good at basketball, even though I couldn’t play. So I spent a summer learning. I even prayed; I wasn’t a religious kid, but I needed all the help I could get. That prayer was the first time I reached toward the God I had glimpsed at the bus stop. Eight years later, at nineteen, I would find him again. But in the meantime, I played.

I played basketball in high school. I became known. And somewhere in that process, the vision of the scientist and Spock faded, and the vision of the basketball player took its place.

By my junior year of high school, the NBA had become a clear unlikelihood—though my sense of vision kept hope alive longer than the evidence warranted. Rather than fully letting go, I joined the intramural basketball team at my college and threw myself into it with intensity, bringing us close to a championship in my junior year. The intramural success extended my identity as a basketball player even though I already knew the answer to my dream of playing professionally. The vision that had shaped my identity for years had an expiration date. And I had reached it—I just was not ready to admit it yet.

What I did not understand then was that I had made the choice every human being eventually faces—the choice between temporal vision and eternal vision. I had chosen the mist:

Now listen, you who say, “Today or tomorrow we will go to this or that city, spend a year there, carry on business and make money.” Why, you do not even know what will happen tomorrow. What is your life? **You are a mist** that appears for a little while and then vanishes.

— James 4:13-14 NIV

Living for the “mist” is living for the temporary vision. The mist is not a moral failure, but a failure of perception. The person living for the mist is not necessarily greedy or selfish. They have simply built their entire identity around something with an expiration date, and they do not know it yet. I did not know it yet.

No one talks enough about what happens to a person when their vision expires. The professional athlete lives this in a bigger and more public way than most. While the public sees the celebrity, the statistical reality is far more fleeting; the average NFL career lasts just 3.3 years. Across other major leagues the window is similarly narrow—from five years in Major League Baseball (MLB) and the National Basketball Association (NBA) to six years for the National Hockey League (NHL). The professional athlete reaches his senior years before most peers have reached their professional stride. Financial fragility often follows. But the deeper collapse is not financial. It is personal. It is a collapse of identity and purpose.

Psychologists call it “identity foreclosure” — where an individual commits to the role of athlete so early and so deeply that they fail to develop any other sense of self. As Brewer, Van Raalte, and Linder described it, athletic identity is both Hercules’ muscles and Achilles’ heel—the very thing that drives elite performance becomes the precise point of emotional undoing when the game ends.

I experienced a version of this at the intramural level. Even with other visions available—I had genuine political interests and eventually became student council president—I was still interacting with the world as an athlete. Basketball was how I knew who I was. When it

ended, I did not know how to be someone else.

The wise and resilient athletes are the ones who are adaptable and far-sighted. They understand their greater identity before the game ends. Former basketball player Bill Bradley understood this perhaps better than anyone. I watched him play for the New York Knicks as a young kid, long before I ever picked up a basketball myself. What drew me to him was not just his game, but what I later read about him—that he had played at Princeton, won a Rhodes Scholarship to Oxford, and only came back to professional basketball because he missed it, not because he needed it for his identity. He had built something more durable than the game long before the game ended. He later wrote about it in [Life on the Run](#) — a book I remember as a young person, a book about a basketball player thinking clearly about what his life actually meant beyond the court. He went on to serve in the United States Senate. The game was one chapter. The whole life was the point.

I have seen this same choice made by friends I know—men who played at levels most athletes never reach and who chose to look ahead to something more lasting than the fleeting pleasures of athletic identity.

Sam Manuel and his brother Sean were drafted by the San Francisco 49ers. I remember sitting in a coffee shop reading about it, not knowing at the time that God was working in ways that would eventually make my own life and ministry richer. Sam now serves alongside Ray Kim as one of the lead ministers who run the day-to-day operations of the Bay Area Christian Church. His athletic formation did not define him. It prepared him.

Other members of our ministry staff have also had rich athletic careers. Scott Moala was drafted as a professional football player. Scott Colvin ran track at the University of North Carolina. Brian Nitta trained and competed in Judo in pursuit of representing the United States in the Olympics. Stone Eleazer wrestled for the University of Florida. These are not men who walked away from athletic excellence; they achieved it at levels most people never will. But like Bill Bradley, they saw beyond it. They understood that what they did on the field, track, or mat was not the whole of who they were. Today they serve as campus leaders and elders at the Bay Area Christian Church, helping to lead a spiritual community that is changing lives across nine campuses.

These men did not get fooled by the mist. They leveraged the temporal to get to the eternal. And their lives are a living answer to the question this section is asking—*not* what vision can you build for yourself, but whose vision are you willing to live?

By faith Moses, when he had grown up, refused to be known as the son of Pharaoh's daughter. He chose to be mistreated along with the people of God rather than to enjoy the fleeting pleasures of sin. He regarded disgrace for the sake of Christ as of greater value than the treasures of Egypt, because he was looking ahead to his reward.

— Hebrews 11:24–26 NIV



Moses recognized the fleeting nature of “the mist”—living for himself— and chose to live for something more. He saw through the temporal to the eternal. That is not the choice of a man who has abandoned ambition. It is the choice of a man with a longer and larger vision than the mist can contain.

This is the choice every human being faces. Not just athletes. Every person. Those of us who chase the temporal vision live for an earthly reality. Those who seek spiritual vision live for an eternal one. And when we choose the eternal we do not become mediocre in this life; we become aligned with the transformative purposes of God.

Don't you know that He who pursues and explores the human heart intimately knows the Spirit's mind because He pleads to God for His saints to align their lives with the will of God? We are confident that God is able to orchestrate everything to work toward something good and beautiful when we love Him and accept His invitation to live according to His plan.

— Romans 8:27–28 The Voice

The eternally-minded person does three things. They align their lives with God's will rather than the mist and vapor of temporal pursuits. They love him. And they accept his invitation to live according to his plan. These are not religious obligations. They are the conditions under which the transformative purposes of God are released into an ordinary human life.

I pray that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened in order that you may know the hope to which he has called you, the riches of his glorious inheritance in his holy people, and his incomparably great power for us who believe. That power is the same as the mighty strength he exerted when he raised Christ from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly realms.

— Ephesians 1:18–20 NIV

Though I may have had a spiritual vision as a child, by the end of high school I had drifted into agnosticism. The vision of God as a big brother had faded with the basketball years. I was not hostile to God. I simply had stopped thinking he was relevant to the life I was trying to build.

In my senior year of high school, I was invited to a church event. It did not change my life. But it made me think. Something was stirred that I could not quite name. Then in my sophomore year of college, I was invited to a Bible study. It was the beginning of a two-year journey that ended with me becoming a Christian. And what I discovered in those years was that the God I had glimpsed at the bus stop as a big brother in a striped shirt was something infinitely greater. He was a Father.

And Jesus was not a distant historical figure—he was someone with a purpose for my life that the mist could never have given me. A purpose greater than basketball. Greater than politics. Greater than anything I had imagined standing at that bus stop.

Now to him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, for ever and ever! Amen.

— Ephesians 3:20–21 NIV

A.W. Tozer wrote that the most important thing about a person is their view of God:

"What comes into our minds when we think about God is the most important thing about us."

— A.W. Tozer, [The Knowledge of the Holy](#)

I have found this to be true in ways I could not have articulated at nineteen. I like to refer to the way we think about God as our “vision of God”—something I

grasped from the life and walk with God of the prophet Ezekiel. All vision from God begins with a vision of God. Spiritual vision starts with a clear and correct view of God.

What we should learn from the athlete who loses everything when the career ends is that we can be that athlete in life — never discovering a vision of God to anchor our vision for ourselves. The athlete does not have a unique problem, but a human one. Their struggle reflects a condition every person faces—the choice between a life built on something temporary and a life anchored in the eternal.

The boy at the bus stop had an incomplete but genuine view and vision of a God who was on his side—and that kept something alive. But it was not until I encountered God as the Father and Jesus as the one who took hold of my life for a purpose—as Paul describes in [Philippians 3:12](#)—that temporal vision gave way to eternal vision.

Ezekiel manifests this idea. We see in his life that every major moment of his calling begins the same way—with a vision of God:

In my thirtieth year, in the fourth month on the fifth day, while I was among the exiles by the Kebar River, the heavens were opened and I saw visions of God.

— Ezekiel 1:1 NIV

He stretched out what looked like a hand and took me by the hair of my head. The Spirit lifted me up between earth and heaven and in visions of God he took me to Jerusalem, to the entrance of the north gate of the inner court, where the idol that provokes to

jealousy stood.

— Ezekiel 8:3 NIV

In visions of God he took me to the land of Israel and set me on a very high mountain, on whose south side were some buildings that looked like a city.

— Ezekiel 40:2 NIV

Ezekiel was not given a vision of what to do. He was not given a strategy or a plan. He was given a vision of God. The vision of what to do will always flow from the vision of who God is. The person who searches for vision and purpose independent of God will find the mist. The person who first seeks a right and accurate vision of God will find, as Ezekiel did, that the vision for their life arrives in the wake of that encounter.

God himself made clear how much this matters to him in another book of the Bible, when he rebuked Job's friends for misrepresenting him:

After the LORD had finished speaking to Job, he said to Eliphaz the Temanite: "I am angry with you and your two friends, for you have not spoken accurately about me, as my servant Job has."

— Job 42:7 NLT

An inaccurate vision of God does not just limit us; it misrepresents the one who holds our destiny. Getting God right is not a theological exercise. It is the foundation on which every other vision rests.

This is the choice the New Frontier calls every person to make. Not the "what, where, when, or how" of life—these are the questions the mist answers. But the "who" and the "why." It's not thoughtless living, drifting through a vanishing life. It's the durable and indestructible life that Jesus himself lived ([Hebrews 7:16](#)), and that he made available to every person who chooses him.

When you choose that life—when you choose the eternal over the temporal, the who and the why over the what and the how—something happens within us that the world cannot explain.

When they saw the courage of Peter and John and realized that they were unschooled, ordinary men, they were astonished and they took note that these men had been with Jesus.

— Acts 4:13 NIV

What the eternal vision produces is not status, credentials, or recognition. It produces the astonishment that comes when an ordinary life is made extraordinary by proximity to Jesus. This closeness to Jesus is what [2 Corinthians 3](#) describes as transformation from glory to glory—the "metamorphōō" we explored in the Frontier of the Heart. The

connection between the Frontier of the Heart and the Frontier of Vision is not coincidental. Spiritual vision and spiritual transformation are not two different things. They are two descriptions of the same reality. When we see God clearly, we are changed. And when we are changed, we begin to see ourselves and others with eternal vision.

The temporal vision produces a life that vanishes like the mist. The eternal vision produces a life that echoes.

Remember, dear brothers and sisters, that few of you were wise in the world's eyes or powerful or wealthy when God called you. Instead, God chose things the world considers foolish in order to shame those who think they are wise. And he chose things that are powerless to shame those who are powerful. God chose things despised by the world, things counted as nothing at all, and used them to bring to nothing what the world considers important. As a result, no one can ever boast in the presence of God.

— 1 Corinthians 1:26–29 NLT

God's vision for us has never been limited by our temporal status. He chose the unschooled fishermen. He chose the boy at the bus stop dreaming of being First Officer Spock. He chose the men who had accolades that are considered important in the world but are ultimately temporary—the professional football player, the Division I collegiate athlete, and the Olympic hopeful—who now lead a spiritual community changing lives across nine campuses in the Bay Area. He chose you. Not because of what you have accomplished. Not because of the vision you had for yourself. Because of the vision he had for you before you were born—a vision more durable, more expansive, and more lasting than anything the mist could ever contain:

“Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, before you were born I set you apart; I appointed you as a prophet to the nations.”

— Jeremiah 1:5 NIV

The frontier of vision for the church

The individual is not the only one who faces the choice between temporal and eternal vision. The church faces it too. And churches, like athletes, have expiration dates—something proven not just by declining attendance and closing buildings but by something far more sobering: the word of the Lord becoming rare within them.

The boy Samuel ministered before the LORD under Eli. In those days **the word of the LORD was rare; there were not many visions.**

— 1 Samuel 3:1 NIV



A church without eternal vision does not always look like it is dying. It can be busy. It can have programs and plans and full calendars. But busyness is not the same as hearing. Activity is not the same as spiritual perception. The word of the Lord becomes rare not because God stops speaking but because a walk that produces the hearing of his word has been replaced by the management of religious activity.

The church that chooses temporal vision—measuring itself by attendance, visibility, and institutional momentum—will eventually discover what the athlete discovers. The game ends. The mist clears. And what remains is the question of whether anything eternal was built.

Eternal vision is not ambition dressed in spiritual language. It is not the ability to cast compelling pictures of a preferred future. It is the God-given capacity available to every Christian to perceive the invisible spiritual dimension of our present reality and live from that perception. In the Bible, Abraham saw what did not yet exist and trusted the one who had promised it—facing his own old age and his wife Sarah's barrenness without weakening in faith, fully persuaded that God had power to do what he had promised ([Romans 4:19-21](#)). That is vision. Not ignoring reality but seeing more of it than the physical senses can report.

Many of the obstacles we face, the difficulties and delays we experience in building our lives, are not random. The evil one is specifically targeting our vision and our hope. What feels like circumstance is often spiritual opposition aimed at the most valuable thing we carry: our sense of what God has planned for us.

The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy; I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full.

— John 10:10 NIV

The thief does not come for our possessions. He comes for our vision. He comes for our hope. He comes to convince us that the mist is all there is—that the temporal is the only reality and the eternal is a fantasy. The person without spiritual vision will interpret every attack as a physical problem requiring a physical solution. Paul names what is actually happening:

For our struggle is not against flesh and blood [contending only with physical opponents], but against the rulers, against the powers, against the world forces of this [present] darkness, against the spiritual forces of wickedness in the heavenly (supernatural) places.

— Ephesians 6:12 AMP

The person without spiritual vision will exhaust themselves fighting the wrong battle. Knowing this shouldn't produce fear, but turn us to the one who can help us win:

When He had disarmed the rulers and authorities [those supernatural forces of evil

operating against us], He made a public example of them [exhibiting them as captives in His triumphal procession], having triumphed over them through the cross.

— Colossians 2:15 AMP

When a Roman general won a great victory, the [defeated enemy commanders](#) were stripped of their weapons, chained, and marched through the streets of Rome in public view. The message was unmistakable: these enemies are real, they were powerful, and they have been completely defeated. That is the image Paul uses. Jesus dying on the cross for our sins was a public triumph. Christ disarmed the spiritual forces operating against us and paraded them as captives. The war is over. The victory is declared. Every person who follows Jesus stands on the ground of that declared victory.

But the victory does not mean the opposition is gone. Imagine a criminal who has just been arrested and handcuffed, sitting on the curb waiting for the police van to arrive. He has no weapons. He is not going anywhere. The arrest is complete. But while he waits, he is shouting — threatening, intimidating, trying to convince everyone that the arrest did not happen. A handcuffed criminal can still kick; he can still cause real harm while the van is on its way.

This criminal—this spiritual enemy—cannot separate us from God. He cannot reverse the impact of Jesus dying on the cross for our sins. He cannot prevent the resurrection. But he can afflict, oppress, deceive, and wear us down in the present. He uses the one weapon he still has: his voice. He wants us so focused on the noise that we forget about the handcuffs.

When he becomes unruly, the answer is to call the guard. The reinforcement is Jesus. The warden is God. We were never meant to handle this battle alone ([Matthew 11:28-30](#))—especially because there is more than one prisoner. The spiritual forces Paul names in Colossians 2 are plural, structured, and persistent. Which means calling on God is not a crisis response. It is a daily practice—a walk with God that keeps every Christian covered in a spiritual environment that never fully quiets down.

When the servant of the man of God got up early the next morning and went outside, there were troops, horses, and chariots everywhere. "Oh, sir, what will we do now?" the young man cried to Elisha. [16] "Don't be afraid!" Elisha told him. "For there are more on our side than on theirs!" [17] Then Elisha prayed, "O LORD, open his eyes and let him see!" The LORD opened the young man's eyes, and when he looked up, he saw that the hillside around Elisha was filled with horses and chariots of fire.

— 2 Kings 6:15-17 NIV

"Open his eyes, Lord, so that he may see." This is the prayer of the New Frontier for every Christian, not just the spiritually mature. Not a prayer for more resources or more people. A prayer for sight. Spiritual vision is what allows a person to see the handcuffs instead of hearing only the threats. It is what gave Paul the cultural intelligence to become all things to all people ([1 Corinthians 9:19-23](#))—not compromising the message but understanding the world well enough to enter it lovingly.

It is the quality described in 1 Chronicles 12:32:

... from Issachar, men who understood the times and knew what Israel should do ...

— 1 Chronicles 12:32 NIV

The [men of the tribe of Issachar](#) possessed spiritual vision. They understood the times. They could see what was happening spiritually, and therefore they knew what they and their fellow Israelites should do.

When we walk with God and see spiritually, we will no longer be deceived by the darkness, intimidated by our fears, or robbed of our dreams. We will not be overwhelmed by the [age of AI](#) or succumb to the [enmity of polarization](#). We will not despair in the [loneliness of our time](#) or become consumed by the hopelessness so pervasive in our times of great conflict—both military and social. We will instead choose to conquer these battles with the faith that we worship the God who keeps our times in his hands:

But I am trusting you, O Lord. I said, “You alone are my God; my times are in your hands. Rescue me from those who hunt me down relentlessly. Let your favor shine again upon your servant; save me just because you are so kind!”

— Psalm 31:14–16 TLB

When we walk with God and see spiritually, we will gain the confidence to act physically. What eternal vision does God have for your life? Are you ready to walk with him in a way that transforms your life from ordinary to extraordinary?





The walk with God that turns his dreams for us into impact that changes the world.



The Frontier of Impact

Years of experience have taught me that time is a gift and aging is gain. In the book of Philipians, Paul tells us to forget the past, but that does not mean we cannot learn from it:

No, dear brothers and sisters, I have not achieved it, but I focus on this one thing:
Forgetting the past and looking forward to what lies ahead ...

— Philipians 3:13 NLT

Throughout both my secular life as an agnostic and my spiritual life of walking with God, I have always associated all things big, visible, and influential with success. But the benefits of time have revealed to me the power of Psalm 131: spectacle does not equal impact. This change in perspective has changed me.

My heart is not lifted up; my eyes are not raised too high; I do not occupy myself with things too great and too marvelous for me. But I have calmed and quieted my soul, like a weaned child with its mother; like a weaned child is my soul within me. Israel, hope in the LORD from this time forth and forevermore.

— Psalm 131:1–3 NIV

Decades ago I made a deliberate choice—to stop traveling and speaking broadly and to invest deeply in our local church. I chose to invest in relationships, in young leaders and mature leaders, in team leadership, and in serving our fellowship by creating paths to meet the needs of as many people as possible. It was not the most visible path. It was not the approach approved by many who had known me or our church in the past. But it was the path that built lives. What I learned and am still learning—slowly and imperfectly—is that the impact path we were on was [the kingdom path](#).

But I am trusting you, O Lord. I said, “You alone are my God; my times are in your hands. Rescue me from those who hunt me down relentlessly. Let your favor shine again upon your servant; save me just because you are so kind!”

— Psalm 31:14–16 TLB

God’s kingdom isn’t a seismic shock. It isn’t a relentless grind. It isn’t a status-seeking spectacle. It isn’t a hunger for the world’s applause. The world will never exalt God’s kingdom the way we want it to, and the person who has crossed the frontier of impact has made peace with that.

Think instead of Jesus’s description in Luke 13 of a woman kneading a pinch of yeast into a mountain of flour until the two become one. This is the secret rhythm of the kingdom—quiet, patient, and utterly unstoppable. It’s the path of permeation, not visibility.

This mindset is not unfamiliar to me; I also see it in 1 Thessalonians 4:11-12:

... And to make it your ambition to lead a quiet life: You should mind your own business and work with your hands, just as we told you, so that your daily life may win the respect of outsiders and so that you will not be dependent on anybody.

— 1 Thessalonians 4:11–12 NIV

Though the kingdom life is bold, loving, and uncompromised, it is also patient and wise, which describes the early church that [changed the world](#) through the transformed lives of ordinary people ([Acts 2:42-47](#)). God values this quiet patience more than flashy might:

It is better to be a patient man than a mighty warrior, better to be someone who controls his temper than someone who conquers a city.

— Proverbs 16:32 Voice

I’ve had to learn to be a patient man. I am still learning. God’s kingdom rewards patience in a way the world does not. And God himself modeled this—he does not always take the shortest path, because the shortest path is not always the path that forms us:

When Pharaoh let the people go, God did not lead them on the road through the Philistine country, though that was shorter. For God said, “If they face war, they might change their minds and return to Egypt.”

— Exodus 13:17 NIV

God took Israel the long way. Not because he could not have taken them the short way, but because the short way would have broken them before they were formed enough to handle what was ahead. The longer path was the forming path. The longer, forming path is about base hits, not home runs. It’s not all at once, but little by little. This is not a failure of vision. It is the wisdom of a God who knows that the people he is forming need to be built before they can be sent.

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Simon Peter, a servant and apostle of Jesus Christ, to those who through the righteousness of our God and Savior Jesus Christ have received a faith as precious as ours: Grace and peace be yours in abundance through the knowledge of God and of Jesus our Lord. His divine power has given us everything we need for a godly life through our knowledge of him who called us by his own glory and goodness. Through these he has given us his very great and precious promises, so that through them you may participate in the divine nature, having escaped the corruption in the world caused by evil desires.

—2 Peter 1:1–4 NIV

God's divine power forms us and has given us everything we need for a godly life of impact through our knowledge of him. Not through our effort, platform, or visibility, but through our knowledge of him. This is the foundation of genuine impact; it's not what we build for God, but what God produces through people who know him. And knowing him produces something specific:

For this very reason, make every effort to add to your faith goodness; and to goodness, knowledge; and to knowledge, self-control; and to self-control, perseverance; and to perseverance, godliness; and to godliness, mutual affection; and to mutual affection, love. For if you possess these qualities in increasing measure, they will keep you from being ineffective and unproductive in your knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ.

—2 Peter 1:5–8 NIV

Effective and productive in your knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ. This is what spiritual formation produces—not impressive religious activity, but lives that bear real fruit because they are genuinely connected to the source. And the warning that follows is equally important:

But whoever does not have them is nearsighted and blind, forgetting that they have been cleansed from their past sins. Therefore, my brothers and sisters, make every effort to confirm your calling and election. For if you do these things, you will never stumble, and you will receive a rich welcome into the eternal kingdom of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

—2 Peter 1:9–11 NIV

“Nearsighted and blind, forgetting they have been cleansed from their past sins.” These are the words Peter uses for the person whose formation has stalled—who has the knowledge of God in their head but not the qualities of God forming in their life. Formation that does



not advance our life is not spiritual formation. It is religious accumulation. Impact is the evidence that formation is real.

Impact is the by-product of the other three spiritual qualities discussed earlier in this series that distinguish a Christian who follows Jesus. While we may possess devotion, conviction, and vision, without impact we must question whether the other three qualities are truly spiritually formed within us.

Any Christian can attempt to pursue impact without a walk with God and settle for influence instead. Influence is what we build. Impact is what God produces through us. They are not the same thing, and confusing them is one of the primary ways any person—in any position, at any stage of the walk—loses God in the midst of the work.

The church, when it practices spiritual formation and participates in the transformative purposes of God, becomes what [Peter Senge](#) calls a “learning organization.” This is not an institution that manages programs but a living community of people being constantly formed, equipped, and grown into something greater than what they could produce on their own. Paul described it two thousand years before Senge put it into organizational language:

So Christ himself gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the pastors and teachers, to equip his people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ.

— Ephesians 4:11–13 NIV

Attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ is not an organizational goal. It is a formation goal. The church exists to produce that kind of person—not a better version of the person who walked in, but someone formed into the fullness of Christ. That is the destination of spiritual formation. And that destination produces the kind of impact the world cannot replicate through any secular formation system.

Then Jesus came to them and said, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.”

— Matthew 28:18–20 NIV

“Make disciples.” In a world desperate for spiritual formation, Jesus is the answer. In a world desperate for identity, Jesus is the answer.

Jesus’s words in these verses are often called the Great Commission. But beneath the familiar language is something more inspiring than a command and more personal than church membership. It is an invitation into destiny.

When FDR spoke of a “[rendezvous with destiny](#),” and when Churchill [described his](#)

[ascension to the prime ministership](#) as the fulfillment of a purpose he had always known was his—they were reflecting something that lives in every human being: a sense that there is something you were made for. Something that, when you find it, feels less like a decision and more like a calling. Reading Andrew Roberts’s [Churchill: Walking with Destiny](#) and H.W. Brands’s [Traitor to His Class](#) showed me that this hunger for purpose was not incidental to Churchill or FDR’s greatness—it was the engine of it. And it is the same hunger that God designed into every person who has ever lived.

That is what making disciples is actually about. Not membership. Not affiliation. Not compliance with a doctrinal checklist. It’s about destiny and the formation of a person— from the inside out, through a walk with God—into someone whose life is aligned with the purpose God had in mind before they were born.

And here is what makes it extraordinary: God does not leave that formation to chance or to our own effort.

Being confident of this, that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus.

—Philippians 1:6 NIV

He who began a good work in us will carry it on to completion. This is formation with a purpose that God himself guarantees. Not a destination we reach by trying harder. A work he finishes in us—in this life and into eternity, because when Jesus returns it is complete.

This is what being a Christian and a disciple actually means. It is not a title, or a category of membership, or a badge of doctrinal correctness. It is a type of person—a person being formed.

This is the person the New Frontier is calling into being. This is the rendezvous with destiny that every searching soul has always felt but never been able to name.

I planted the seed, Apollos watered it, but God has been making it grow. So neither the one who plants nor the one who waters is anything, but only God, who makes things grow.

— 1 Corinthians 3:6–7 NIV

When a person plants and waters with this sense of purpose—not anxious about their impact, but confident that God is at work in what they cannot see—this is the faithfulness of destiny. A confidence like this is inspired by a walk with God that produces something the world cannot manufacture: a person so freed from self-protection and self-promotion that their ordinary life becomes extraordinary in God’s hands. This is the type of person who finds a life of faith freeing, not restrictive.

It is for freedom that Christ has set us free. Stand firm, then, and do not let yourselves be burdened again by a yoke of slavery.

— Galatians 5:1 NIV





Christianity is about freedom. Freedom from self-deception ([John 8:31-32 NIV](#)), freedom from the self-destructiveness of sin ([Romans 6:22 NLT](#)), the complete freedom Jesus promises from everything in this life that limits and enslaves ([John 8:36 NIV](#)).

When we don't experience this freedom, Scripture makes clear the reasons why.

Such regulations indeed have an appearance of wisdom, with their self-imposed worship, their false humility and their harsh treatment of the body, but they lack any value in restraining sensual indulgence.

— Colossians 2:23 NIV

They have lost connection with the head, from whom the whole body, supported and held together by its ligaments and sinews, grows as God causes it to grow.

— Colossians 2:19 NIV

This is the contrast Paul draws throughout his letters. Religious regulations that look spiritual but produce no genuine change enslave rather than free—they make us disconnected from the head, disconnected from Christ, who is the source of all growth.

Destiny and restriction cannot coexist. Compliance without transformation produces people who find Christianity restrictive and constraining—not because God is restrictive, but because a life of religious performance without genuine interior change offers no freedom, no joy, and no real reason to stay. What people experience as constraint is not God. It is the absence of him.

When the connection to the head is restored—when a walk with God replaces religious regulation as the source of life—what once felt burdensome becomes the most liberating experience available to a human being ([1 John 5:3](#)). What changes our lives is not joining a spiritual community in order to be validated. What changes our lives is being formed by God until we actually want what he wants—and discovering that what he wants is the most liberating thing we have ever desired.

A person liberated by God is a person available to God. That availability is what produces impact— not strategy, scale, or human effort.

Nothing can hinder the Lord from saving, whether by many or by few ([1 Samuel 14:6](#)). The size of the harvest belongs to God ([Matthew 9:37-38](#)). The faithfulness of the planting belongs to us ([1 Corinthians 3:5-6](#)).

The impact path for the church

At the Bay Area Christian Church, our two missions that express our sense of purpose are making God known and doing good. These are not programs we run but the natural expression of people being genuinely formed by a walk with God. Through these missions, God continues to guide us down the path of impact.

Making God known flows through all nine of our campuses across the Bay Area, through small groups meeting throughout the week, through college and teen ministries helping young people discover God for themselves, and through online resources like [Deep Spirituality](#) and “The Spiritual Frontier” which reach the searching and the skeptical across the digital world.

Doing good flows through community service initiatives we have started and partnerships we have built. [E-Life and E-Sports](#) are programs we support to serve people with disabilities and promote full inclusion. Digital Scribbler advances [technology that gives voice to those who cannot speak for themselves](#). Our [Holiday Toy Drive](#) was started in 2008 and has brought over 22,000 toys to kids in need throughout the Bay Area. We started by partnering with [A Better Way](#) to serve children in foster care throughout the Bay Area and have since expanded to partner with agencies in every county that serve underprivileged youth. We have also built an ongoing partnership to support the [Office of Violence Prevention](#) in Stockton, consistently supporting them in their efforts to bring real change to their community and individual people’s lives.

In addition to these partnerships, we have countless member-led initiatives in our local communities to serve the underserved. Members of the church meet regularly to collect and deliver needed items for people experiencing homelessness in San Jose. Others distribute “bags of love” with food and essential items for the unhoused in San Francisco.

Doing good is not a strategy. It is not evangelism in disguise. It is the natural expression of people who have been genuinely transformed by a walk with God. You do not have to believe what we believe to receive what we give. We serve because of who we are, not because of who you are or are not.

And you did not receive the “spirit of religious duty,” leading you back into the fear of never being good enough. But you have received the “Spirit of full acceptance,” enfolding you into the family of God. And you will never feel orphaned, for as he rises up within us, our spirits join him in saying the words of tender affection, “Beloved Father!”

— Romans 8:15 TPT

The old metrics of behavioral Christianity measured attendance and membership. The spiritual metrics are devotion, conviction, vision, and impact. Religious duty produces people who comply. Spiritual family produces people who are transformed and who love. The difference is not organizational. It is the difference between the letter and the Spirit—the oldest and most important spiritual distinction in the history of the church, and the one that matters most right now.

The invitation

I began this series by telling you about room 328B, where a curious young man searching through great thinkers discovered that God was the answer to every question he was carrying. I want to close by telling you that the answer has not changed. God is real. He is

interested in you. He has been behind the tapestry of your life all along—placing eternity in your heart ([Ecclesiastes 3:11](#)), claiming you as his own, appointing you beforehand according to the purpose of him who works everything in agreement with the counsel and design of his will ([Ephesians 1:11](#)).

The New Frontier is not a church program. It is not a vision document. It is an invitation to every person—the Christian who has been walking with God for decades and needs to press on further, the person who left institutional Christianity and has never stopped aching for something real, the searcher who felt the pull of Ecclesiastes 3:11 and has been moving toward it without knowing what it is:

He has made everything beautiful and appropriate in its time. He has also planted eternity [a sense of divine purpose] in the human heart [a mysterious longing which nothing under the sun can satisfy, except God]—yet man cannot find out (comprehend, grasp) what God has done (His overall plan) from the beginning to the end.

— Ecclesiastes 3:11 AMP

It is a call to cross the only frontier that ultimately changes everything: the frontier of the heart. Behavior changes actions, but spirituality changes us.

The spirituality of Jesus is a walk with God that transforms who we are, how we live, what we see, what we build, and how we love. It is the only spirituality that has ever genuinely changed the world—not through institutional dominance or cultural conquest but through the quiet, permeating, unstoppable transformation of ordinary human lives. And it is available to anyone willing to walk.

If you abide in Me and My voice abides in you, anything you ask will come to pass for you. Your abundant growth and your faithfulness as My followers will bring glory to the Father.

—John 15:7-8 Voice

Abide. Ask. Abundant growth. Glory to the Father. That is the sequence. That is the promise. That is the New Frontier—not a destination we reach by trying harder, but a territory we enter by walking with God. Not a frontier only for the spiritually mature or the institutionally positioned. A frontier for every person who is willing to stop moving as before, look up, and begin to seek the God who is not far from any of us.

We live in a globalized, interconnected, and yet profoundly lonely world with an unknown future, but the upheaval of the 21st century is not a threat to the church or to the Christian life. It is the very ground on which God's message spreads to new frontiers and attracts more and more people — exactly as it did in the first century, when upheaval was the context in which the church was born, and a walk with God was the only thing that made the difference ([Acts 12:24](#)).

The person who keeps moving forward by faith enters the spiritual frontier—where discovery never ends, God's purposes unfold, and ordinary lives become the means through which God changes the world.

The church that stops moving forward has already stopped believing. Belief moves. It always has. So wherever you are—believe, or believe again. Move forward. Embrace the New Frontier. A world desperate for genuine change is waiting for people like you who are willing to walk with God.



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About the author

Russ Ewell is Executive Minister of the Bay Area Christian Church, author of “He’s Not Who You Think He Is,” and founder of Deep Spirituality, E-Life, Digital Scribbler, and Hope Technology Group. He is a writer and teacher exploring faith at the edge of modern life, helping people discover biblical Christianity that is intellectually serious, emotionally grounding, and transformative.