



CHRIST'S VISION FOR THE CHURCH

A ReVision Study from The Fellowship of Ailbe

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The Fellowship of Ailbe

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Welcome to *Christ's Vision for the Church*

Welcome to *Christ's Vision for the Church*, in which we try to discern the mind of Christ concerning what *He* intends for His Body, nation, temple, and people. *Christ's Vision for the Church* is one of our *ReVision* studies in Biblical worldview.

These studies are designed for individual or group use. While you may derive much benefit from studying on your own, that benefit can be greatly enhanced by joining with a friend or a group to read, discuss, share, challenge, and pray for one another.

Take one lesson at a time, reading the Scriptures and narrative aloud, and pausing to reflect on and discuss the questions provided. Don't be in a hurry. Be willing to take more than one session on a lesson if it will allow you to delve more deeply into the subject matter.

If you're in a group, make sure you prepare for each study by reading through the lesson in advance and answering the questions in writing. Take turns leading your group. Let every member share in the privilege and responsibility of facilitating discussions. Group leaders should not feel like they have to "have all the answers." Their task is simply to lead the group through the readings and questions, and to help everyone participate.

These studies are designed as brief introductions to the subject under consideration. We hope they will enlarge your worldview, help you to become more firmly rooted in Scripture, equip you to minister to others, and stimulate you to want to learn more about the Word of God and the Biblical worldview.

We're happy to provide this study at no charge. If you find these studies helpful, we hope you'll consider sending a gift to The Fellowship of Ailbe, to help us in making these resources available to others.

May the Lord bless your study of His Word.

T. M. Moore
Principal

1 Whose Church? Whose Vision?

"...I will build My church, and the gates of Hades shall not prevail against it." Matthew 16.18

Whatever you want

These days it's possible to find just about whatever you might want in a church.

Whether your style is traditional or contemporary, your interest fellowship or outreach, your preference for the young and hip or the older and more sedate, big steeple or no steeple, liturgical or more spontaneous, preaching or story-telling – just about whatever you want in a church, you can find.

Church leaders today feel at liberty to shape and position their churches according to the interests and needs of their communities, or the preferences in style or structure of church leaders. Never before have there been so many different kinds of churches to engage the visions of church leaders or the fancies of prospective worshipers.

In some ways this is a wholesome and welcome development, a fresh change from the days when just about any church you might enter seemed as cold, stodgy, and irrelevant as the next.

However, the danger is that, in seeking to distance themselves from traditional church forms and formats, churches may all be drifting toward a point where, once again, they're all starting to look and feel the same – only contemporary, at least, for now.

Not ours to shape as we like

Changing, updating, repositioning, and reshaping our churches can be very healthy, but only if we keep within parameters of change and reformation which acknowledge that there are some basic components of shape, form, elements, mission, and so forth which must characterize *any* church in order for it to *be* a church.

For, at the end of the day, the church is not *ours* to build and shape as we like. The Church and all local churches as expressions of the universal Church belong to the Lord Jesus Christ. In His ascended glory He has taken on the task of building His Church. It is the top item on His agenda, because the Church is both the staging-ground and forward outpost of the Kingdom of God.

Moreover, Christ has provided the tools, resources, and designs by which local church leaders must build their congregations. If we would enjoy the blessing of the Church's Chief Architect and Builder on our facilities, ministries, and people, we should pay special attention to what Jesus intends for His Church.

We are the Lord's Church

The Church belongs to the Lord Jesus Christ; He alone articulates the vision church leaders must follow if they would fulfill His purpose in having raised them up to build a church. Jesus Christ intends for His Church to be an agent of transformation – salt, light, and leaven – wherever it puts down roots and puts up walls. If churches are not having the kind of transforming effects Jesus envisioned, it may be that we have been building according to the wrong set of drawings.

Today, when the Church in America is more marginal and meaningless than it has ever been, we do well to re-examine the vision of the Church which guides our local efforts at worship and ministry. We may build impressive facilities, attract large numbers of people, and fill everybody's week with plenty of things to do, but we will not be the Church unless we are following the plans and building according to the designs of the One Who, at the end of the day, must build our churches Himself if they are to be what He intends.

Christ's Vision for the Church

The Church belongs to the Lord. He calls it into being by His Word and Spirit. He indwells it. He appoints our mission. He provides the resources, power, and support we require in order to fulfill that mission.

And He alone knows what He's looking for – and what we should be looking for – in local churches all over the world. The Church is the Body of Christ, the top item on His agenda as He rides forth each day, conquering and to conquer.

But unless we and our churches are on the same page as the Lord, we cannot expect to know the fullness of righteousness, peace, and joy in the Spirit which comes with being the Kingdom people of the Lord.

For reflection or discussion

1. How would you explain the vision of your church to someone who was thinking about coming to worship with you?
2. Does your church have a formal statement describing its vision – how it sees itself, its mission, and its place in the community?
3. Meditate on 2 Timothy 3.15-17. Would you say that building a church is a “good work”? Do you think the Scriptures are sufficient to guide us in this work? Why or why not?
4. With respect to your own church, what do you find most helpful for your walk with and work for the Lord? Why?
5. What are your goals for this study? What do you hope to learn?

Next steps: What are the guiding components of your church's vision? Talk with a pastor or church leader about this question. How many images, bullet points, benchmarks, or guiding ideas can you discern as comprising your church's vision?

Prayer:

2 The Temple of the Lord

...Jesus Christ Himself being the chief cornerstone, in whom the whole building, being fitted together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord, in whom you also are being built together for a dwelling place of God by the Spirit. Ephesians 2.20-22

Dwelling place of God

Foundational to Christ's vision for His Church is that it should be a dwelling place where He and His people live together in the salvation He provides.

The New Testament uses the language of "temple" to describe this, primarily because this is what the people of God were familiar with in those days. In ancient Israel, God came to dwell with His people, to meet with them and receive their offerings, and to send them out with His blessing, from the confines of a temple constructed according to God's own plans.

Similarly, among the Gentile peoples of the Roman world, temples – like the temple of Diana in Ephesus – served as a kind of meeting place with the gods, their "home away from home" when they weren't lolling around as usual on Mt. Olympus.

So it doesn't surprise us when we see the New Testament freely using the language of "temple" and "dwelling-place" to describe local churches.

We are the temple of the Lord

But, unlike pagan temples and the temple of the Old Testament, the temple which is the Church of our Lord Jesus Christ is not made with hands – it is not a constructed site, at least, not in the first instance. The temple of the Lord is realized in the members of the Body of Christ, in whom Jesus dwells by His Spirit. We who believe are the temple of the Lord (1 Cor. 6.19), both individually and together.

Now this has tremendous significance, in the first place, because it should turn us away from thinking of our churches – of that which Christ would build through us – as physical and material facilities. The bricks and mortar and all the furnishings may be *useful* when the temple of the Lord assembles, but these are *not* the temple of the Lord in themselves. We should be very careful about attaching the idea of "church" to buildings and real estate. The church and temple of the Lord are the people in whom the Lord dwells by His Spirit. If they think of the *buildings* that accommodate them rather than *themselves* as the church and temple of the Lord, this can have serious negative ramifications.

Nevertheless, large portions of the budgets and time of any local congregation go to caring for, keeping up, and using a physical facility. That's not bad in itself; it can be, though, if when we think of "church" we think, in the first instance, of the buildings in which we gather as the temple of the Lord.

The temple of the Lord is His own body, which He is raising up, adorning, beautifying, strengthening, and commissioning to the task of advancing the Kingdom of God on earth as it is in heaven. It is His people, the Church, who are being sanctified in the truth of God and fitted for the work of ministry and seeking the Kingdom of the Lord.

Under construction

The Apostle Paul tells us that a temple of God, properly adorned and maintained, grows in unity and maturity in the Lord Jesus, as pastors and teachers equip church members to do the work of ministry (Eph. 4.11-16). A building and other facilities can aid in this process, but they are not essential. Indeed, in many ways they can actually *distract* us from our task by so defining and confining what we do in the name of ministry that our

endeavors consistently look more like the ways of the world than the work of the Lord, more like maintaining and maximizing an institution than seeking and advancing a Kingdom not of this world.

Jesus is building Himself a dwelling-place of beauty and joy, one that so reflects His presence and power that it can seem, at times, to be almost indistinguishable from Him (Ps. 48.1-3, 12-14).

As we build our churches let us not lose sight of the fact that what matters most to the Lord is not the number, shape, and usability of the buildings we erect, but the health, growth, and ministries of the people in whom He has come to dwell.

For the people who believe in Jesus are His temple, the centerpiece of Christ's vision for the Church.

For reflection or discussion

1. What makes a temple a temple? In other words, when you think of a temple, what feelings, images, or purposes come to mind?
2. "The bricks and mortar and all the furnishings may be *useful* when the temple of the Lord assembles, but these are *not* the temple of the Lord in themselves." Do you agree? Why or why not?
3. How is it possible for each member of a church, and the church as a whole, to be the temple of the Lord? How does this "work together" for the purposes of Ephesians 2.20-22?
4. "Jesus is building Himself a dwelling-place of beauty and joy, one that so reflects His presence and power that it can seem, at times, to be almost indistinguishable from Him (Ps. 48.1-3, 12-14)." Meditate on those verses. On a scale of 1 to 10, where 10 is the highest, to what extent do these verses describe your church? Explain.
5. Why should we begin our thinking about our vision for the local with this image of the Church as the temple of the Lord? What problems can arise from not beginning here?

Next steps: What does it mean for you as a church member to be the "temple" of the Lord? And what about all of you together as church members? How should you expect to experience what it means to be the "temple" of the Lord? Talk with some of your fellow church members about these questions.

Prayer:

3 The Lord's Nation

But you are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, His own special people, that you may proclaim the praises of Him who called you out of darkness into His marvelous light. 1 Peter 2:9

A holy nation

From His throne at the Father's right hand, the Lord Jesus Christ is building His Church, working by His Word and Spirit to bring together and beautify a Body of people characterized by ministry, unity, and maturity.

The Church, and every local church, is, in the first place, a people who belong to Christ and whom He has redeemed and adopted in order to seek and advance His rule on earth as it is in heaven. We are the temple and dwelling-place of the Lord, the staging-ground and outpost from which He is advancing His Kingdom on earth as it is in heaven.

Not only are we to think of ourselves as a glorious and holy temple, the dwelling-place of the Lord; we are also to consider that, in Christ's vision for the Church, we are a holy nation, the *Lord's* nation. When we think about what our churches should become, the metaphor of a nation should factor into our planning and ministries.

Our purpose is to become what the Lord declares us to be: a holy people, raised up by the Lord for the mission of proclaiming His praises to the world. As parts of a holy nation, local churches should think of themselves, what they would become, and how they should build in terms of three important components.

Three components

First, as parts of a holy nation, local churches require courageous and effective leaders.

Church *leaders* are called to be shepherds (Jer. 23.1-4; Eph. 4.11, 12; 1 Pet. 5.1-3), whose primary responsibility is to prepare the people of God for works of ministry. Not some of the people, *all*. In the holy nation of Christ – His Church – all the citizens are on active duty, all are called to the Kingdom and glory of the Lord, and all must be equipped by their leaders to serve in proclaiming, by word and deed, the excellencies of the Lord.

Second, a holy nation also requires a holy *law*, even the Law of God (Rom. 7.12). The citizens of Christ's nation must be instructed in the ways of righteousness so that they may consider how to stimulate and encourage one another to walk the path of good works that Jesus walked according to the Law of God (Heb. 10.24; 1 Jn. 2.1-16).

If we are building our churches without recourse to the Law of God, we are not following the design and plan of the Chief Architect Himself, and we cannot expect to know the kind of Kingdom greatness Christ holds out to us (cf. Matt. 5.17-19).

Finally, like any nation, the holy nation which is the Church of our Lord Jesus possesses a sacred *lore*, by which it traces its history, declares its identity, and preserves its future.

The vast cultural heritage of the Christian church – in art, literature, education, theology, heroes, and good works of every kind – is ours to treasure, emulate, adopt and adapt, and pass on so that the Lord's nation might continue beyond our day (Ps. 78.1-8).

Building a nation

As we build our churches, therefore, we must embrace this notion of a holy people unto the Lord – with leaders, a Law, and sacred lore by which we may establish our unique identity and mission among the peoples of the earth.

We are the temple of the Lord, and must devote ourselves to increasing in holiness and worshipping the Lord in Spirit and in truth. But we are a nation, a nation within and among the nations of the world, and we have more in common with Christians from all around the world than with our unbelieving fellow-citizens of the national entity we call our home.

Christ's vision for the Church is that we should be a world-spanning nation of holy people, united in Him to declare His praises and embody His beauty, goodness, and truth. We are not building the Church as Jesus intends unless this idea of being the Lord's nation looms large in our thinking, planning, and work.

For reflection or discussion

1. The Church is a nation within and among nations. How does that come to expression in your church? In your experience as a citizen of the Lord's nation?
2. Do the leaders of your church regard themselves as shepherds? Who carries out that role in your church? What forms does shepherding take in your church? Do you think there should be more or less shepherding on the part of your leaders? Why?
3. Meditate on Romans 7.12, Matthew 5.17-19, and 1 John 2.1-6. How would you describe the place of the Law of God in your church?
4. How much of the "national lore" of the Church does your church draw on for its mission? Can you give some examples?
5. How does your church express its "nationhood" with other churches in your community? Around the world?

Next steps: Does the "nation" of the Lord in your community actually look like such? Is it obvious to those outside the church that all the churches that believe in Christ and trust His Word are one people? Why or why not? Talk with some Christian friends from other churches about this question. Can you come up with any ideas for helping to actualize your Christian nationhood within your own community?

Prayer:

4 Servant of the Lord

"If I then, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet." John 13.14

Built by ministry

We have mentioned that the Lord Jesus is building His Church as a glorious temple and a holy nation unto the Lord. We're not talking about buildings or denominations here, but of people, men and women redeemed by Jesus Christ and called together into local fellowships, where they labor to build the Church according to Jesus' designs and plans.

You are the Lord's temple; *you* are His holy nation. My prayer is that you're beginning to realize more and more the glorious privilege and radical power such a calling entails.

But how does a church get built-up like this, so that it becomes, increasingly, a beautiful temple and a holy nation?

Paul tells us that as church members take up works of ministry Jesus uses them to carry out His plan for building the Church (Eph. 4.11, 12).

This means that every member of every local church is a vital brick in the temple of the Lord, a contributing citizen to the holy nation. Each of us must submit to the teaching and equipping we need in order to carry out our callings as ministers and servants of the Lord.

Every member a minister

The service we take will be unique to the places we go and the people we meet there. Each member of a local church has a [Personal Mission Field](#) to which he or she has been sent by the Lord Jesus to bring near the Kingdom of God, hoist the banner of God's glory, and serve the needs of those around them (Jn. 20.21; 2 Cor. 10.13-8).

Every day we encounter people who need to know some touch of Jesus' grace, truth from His Word, or presence of His comforting Spirit. Church members are called to be conduits of grace, truth, and comfort to the world, just as Jesus was when He walked among us.

But the life of service doesn't come naturally to us. Rather, we must embrace it in prayer, prepare for it in study and training, and seek it every moment in all our relationships, roles, and responsibilities. We must pray daily that God would help us to make the most of our time, and that He would show and lead us into just the work of service that each person we meet may require (Eph. 5.15-17; Ps. 90.12, 16, 17).

No local church can seriously regard itself as such which is not diligently *equipping* and *sending* every member of its body for works of ministry. This is how local churches grow in unity and maturity; this is how, by word and deed, we proclaim the excellencies of Christ to the world around us. The temple where Christ dwells swells with His presence and issues in rivers of living water through the citizens of His Kingdom, as they are dispersed throughout the neighborhoods, workplaces, and schools of our communities (Jn. 7.37-39).

Gifts for serving

To help us in this high and holy calling, Jesus has provided gifts for ministry which He bestows according to His good pleasure by His Spirit (1 Cor. 12.7-11). Every church member has access to *all* the gifts for ministry Christ would give us, according to the *opportunities* for serving others that crop up before him each day.

It will help us be more alert to such opportunities, and ready to draw on the gifts of the Spirit, if we begin

praying more consistently for the Lord to use us as His servants, and if we will prepare ourselves through training and discipline for whatever situations we might expect in our Personal Mission Fields.

The Church is called to be the servant of the Lord, and to reach out in love to those around it with the same love that Jesus showed when He walked among us. Unless equipping all the members for works of ministry is our objective, we are not building the Church as Jesus intends.

For reflection or discussion

1. Jesus said that He is sending His disciples into the world in the same way He Himself was sent. How does John 13.1-15 help us in thinking about our calling as the Church?
2. Suppose you were approached by a new Christian who wanted to develop more of a “servant” mindset and lifestyle. How would you counsel that person to do that?
3. Meditate on John 7.37-39, Acts 1.8, Galatians 5.22 and 23, and 1 Corinthians 12.7-11. What is the role of the Spirit in helping us to be a people who serve others? How do we “tap into” His work?
4. Talk about how prayer might help you to become more consistent in serving the people in your Personal Mission Field.
5. What are some ways Christians might encourage and assist one another in this aspect of our calling as followers of Christ and members of His nation?

Next steps: Have you mapped out your Personal Mission Field? Download our free brochure by [clicking here](#), and get started praying and preparing to fulfill your calling as a servant of Lord among the servants of the Lord. Share this exercise with another member of your church.

Prayer:

5 Weapons of Righteousness

*"For I have bent Judah My bow,
Fitted the bow with Ephraim,
And raised up your sons, O Zion,
Against your sons, O Greece,
And made you like the sword of a mighty man."* Zechariah 9.13

The Church militant

Theologians sometimes refer to the Church on earth in any given era as "the Church militant." The Scriptures go so far as to refer to the Church as the warhorse of the Lord, His conveyance in battle against the forces of wickedness and sin (cf. Ps. 45.3-5; Rev. 6.2; Zech. 10.3).

Some folks are offended by such martial terminology in reference to the Body of Christ. But this is not an idea invented by hot-headed theologians or pious political activists; the Lord Himself looks upon His Church as weapons of righteousness for advancing His reign.

We know, of course, that, as the Church, we are engaged in a constant spiritual warfare, for the waging of which the Lord has given us many valuable spiritual weapons (Eph. 6.10-20). This is not what we have reference to, however. Rather, the members of local churches – who are being built together as communities of servants into a holy nation and a glorious temple for the Lord – all church members are to consider that *they themselves* are weapons of righteousness in the hand of the Lord. Just what does this mean to suggest?

The goal of all we do

First, that *righteousness is our objective* in all we do as the people of the Lord. Righteousness is nothing more or less than the character of Jesus Himself, manifesting in and through us into all our relationships, roles, and responsibilities.

Jesus commanded us to seek first the Kingdom of God and His righteousness (Matt. 6.33). Paul tells us that the Kingdom of God, in fact, is righteousness, and that we do well before God and with men to take this as our calling (Rom. 14.17, 18).

Thus, as servants of one another and the world, the end of all our service must be the *increase of righteousness*, the increase the resurrection presence and life of our Lord Jesus Christ. We want to grow in righteousness ourselves, and we want to aid and encourage others to grow in righteousness as well.

And, since the Law of God is righteous, walking in obedience to the Law and urging others to do so as well must be central to all our life and ministry in the churches (Rom. 7.12; Eph. 2.8-10).

The struggle for righteousness

With respect to those who do not know the Lord, church members must *exemplify* the righteousness of the Lord, but they must also *call on others* to forsake their sins and seek the righteousness of Jesus Christ by grace through faith (Acts 2.37, 38; Rom. 3.19-30).

Further, church members must prayerfully consider how to stimulate and encourage one another to good works of righteousness in every area of our lives (Heb. 10.24). We must pray for one another, prepare well for our times together, and plan specific ways to encourage and assist one another in the struggle for righteousness.

By such means the righteousness of the Kingdom becomes more visible in the lives and ministries of the members of local churches.

The psalmists envisioned the Lord Jesus as going forth each day to advance His cause of truth, meekness, and righteousness (Ps. 45.3-6). This He does with the “sharp arrows” of His people, who wield His powerful Word as they live in His righteousness, call others to repent of their sins and seek the righteousness of Christ, and encourage and equip one another for lives of righteousness in all we do.

No church leader can honestly be said to be building Christ's church who does not consider the members of his or her congregation as *weapons of righteousness* in the Lord's mighty hand, and does not prepare them to fulfill this high and holy calling.

For reflection or discussion

1. Are you at all troubled by this terminology, “weapons of righteousness,” in referring to the church? Why or why not?
2. What is righteousness? How do Christians, as weapons of righteousness, increase in righteousness (cf. 2 Cor. 3.12-18)?
3. Thinking about Jesus' life and ministry, what problems might we expect to encounter as we strive to become the Lord's weapons of righteousness? How can we prepare for this? Help one another? Get through such times?
4. “With respect to those who do not know the Lord, church members must *exemplify* the righteousness of the Lord, but they must also *call on others* to forsake their sins and seek the righteousness of Jesus Christ by grace through faith (Acts 2.37, 38; Rom. 3.19-30).” Why do you think so many believers are reluctant to “call on others” to turn from sin to Christ? How can we improve in this aspect of our calling?
5. “No church leader can honestly be said to be building Christ's church who does not consider the members of his or her congregation as *weapons of righteousness* in the Lord's mighty hand, and does not prepare them to fulfill this high and holy calling.” Do you agree? Why or why not?

Next steps: How's the struggle for righteousness going in your life? In your Personal Mission Field? Talk with a pastor or church leader concerning how you might become “sharper” as a weapon of righteousness in this great struggle.

Prayer:

6 Agent of Change

"You are the salt of the earth... You are the light of the world... Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works and glorify your Father in heaven." Matthew 5.13-16

Three metaphors

As the temple, nation, and servants of the Lord Jesus, church members are weapons of righteousness in His hands, equipped, sent, and active in seeking first the Kingdom of God and His righteousness, bringing the beauty, goodness, and truth of the Lord to their Personal Mission Fields and the world.

From this it should be clear that Jesus is building His Church as an agent of change, an epicenter of transformation to reflect the good purposes and character of the Lord in a world of unbelief and sin.

But let's not miss the *three primary metaphors* Jesus used to suggest how churches bring about the kinds of spiritual, moral, and cultural changes that turn their world rightside-up for Jesus. We do not serve as agents of change by wielding the sword of battle or stuffing the ballot boxes of our favorite politicians, at least, not in the first instance.

The Church changes its society by serving as light, salt, and leaven.

Light of the world

As light, church members are sent into the dark world of their [Personal Mission Fields](#) to emit a constant glow of glory, which they gain from the Lord in their times of prayer and study in the Spirit (2 Cor. 3.12-18). As Christians sanctify Christ as Lord in their hearts, they become filled with hope, characterized by peace and joy, and eager and enabled for every good work (1 Pet. 3.15; 2 Tim. 3.15-17). Such a steady, warm, glow of divine light – in all our words and deeds – cannot help but attract those we serve to the very Source of such light, even Him Who is the Light of the World.

Is this what's happening in your life? If not, talk with a church leader right away, and ask him or her to help you realize more of the light of Christ, growing in you and glowing through you every day.

Salt of the earth

As salt, church members resist everything that tends to corruption and decay, preserving all that is wholesome and good against all that threatens to undermine or destroy it. They also, as living sacrifices to the Lord (Rom. 12.1, 2), "salt" the presence of God's gracious covenant into a lost and confused world. And, by their everyday lives and conversations, they create a thirst for the Lord and His promises on the part of those who know them.

Thus church members speak out against the lies and half-truths of an age that rejects the truth of God. They refuse to participate in the works of darkness that corrupt the hearts of men. They maintain a constant self-watch against any sin settling into their own souls, and they exhort and admonish one another against any sinful or corrupting practices. And they live to the fullest all the precious and very great promises of God, which they realize increasingly through our Lord Jesus Christ (2 Pet. 1.4; 2 Cor. 1.20).

Leaven of grace and truth

As leaven, church members do not hold back in seeking the Kingdom of God and His righteousness, simply because they are few in number or small in significance. They recognize that every step of faith, every deed of love, every word of truth done or spoken in faith has the potential to touch a needy soul with the reality and love of Jesus Christ.

They also know that vast multitudes of angels stand ready to assist them, that the Holy Spirit of God dwells in them, and that nothing they might undertake in Jesus' Name will be impossible for them. So they work gradually, steadily, step by step, bit by bit, and little by little, making Kingdom progress in often infinitesimal ways as they faithfully follow Him Who has called them to be agents of change.

The first believers understood this high and holy calling. They turned their world upside-down by living for and proclaiming Christ and His righteousness (Acts 17.1-9). We are not their true spiritual heirs unless this is our aspiration as well.

No church must be content until its members are fully equipped and deployed for righteousness' sake, living as light, salt, and leaven to turn their communities and world rightside-up for Jesus Christ.

For reflection or discussion

1. Would you say that your church – leaders and members – expects to be an agent of change in its community? Why or why not? If so, in what ways?
2. Why is “light” an excellent way of thinking about the church’s ability to bring change to the world?
3. What about “salt”?
4. And “leaven”?
5. “The first believers understood this high and holy calling. They turned their world upside-down by living for and proclaiming Christ and His righteousness (Acts 17.1-9). We are not their true spiritual heirs unless this is our aspiration as well.” Comment:

Next steps: Does your church have a plan for increasing righteousness in your community? Ask a pastor or church leader about this. Offer to help wherever you can.

Prayer:

7 Bride of Christ

Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ also loved the church and gave Himself for her, that He might sanctify and cleanse her with the washing of water by the word, that He might present her to Himself a glorious church, not having spot or wrinkle or any such thing, but that she should be holy and without blemish. Ephesians 5.25-27

A call for holiness

The Church and all its members are the Bride of Jesus Christ. We enjoy a mysterious, intimate, passionate, joyous, and wholly pleasurable relationship with the One Who has bound us to Himself in love. We see Him enthroned in splendor; we meet with Him in His glory; we know the reviving power of His presence and grace; and we serve with Him according to His purposes in the world.

A day is coming when the followers of Jesus Christ will be united with Him and one another in an eternal dwelling place of perfect joy and holy, complete pleasure. Toward that day all that Jesus is doing in building His Church is intentionally and consistently directed: He pours out His Spirit in order to prepare His Bride. He sends out His angels to assist in making her ready. He works all things in history and the cosmos in order to build, prepare, and endear His Church to Him.

Here is a call for holiness. Churches that have set their focus on the horizon of eternity, in anticipation of meeting their heavenly Bridegroom, will work hard at removing every spot, stain, or semblance of worldliness and sin with which they might be tainted.

This means regular and faithful attendance on the ministry of the Word on the part of every member. It means a conscious and diligent effort on everyone's part to increase in the beauty of the Lord and to lay aside every vestige of fleshly living. It also means mutual accountability and encouragement in the pursuit of holiness, as individuals and congregations, looking toward the day of our being united with the Lord.

A call for good works

Here also is a call for good works, so that by our persistence in doing the works of the Lord we may be seen by all to be fitted for being united with Him.

The Lord sees His Church as the joy and beauty of the earth (Ps. 48.1, 2), reflecting His splendor and goodness to the watching world. But when churches spend the bulk of their budgets and energies on themselves alone, it's hard to see how they can be of much good in their local communities.

Churches that reach out to the poor and needy, express concern over local moral and social issues, discover the needs of their neighbors and work diligently to address them, look for ways to bring beauty and joy to their neighbors, and, above all, are faithful in proclaiming the Gospel of the Kingdom to their communities – such churches show that they are preparing themselves for eternal blessedness with the One Who went before them in just such ways as these.

A call for worship

And here is a call for adoring worship. The church that looks forward to eternity with her Lord will grab at every foretaste of that bliss it can know. This is part of the purpose of worship, to train our hearts on the Lord and to cultivate our affections and priorities so that we please and find pleasure in Him as our all in all.

Worship that takes as its starting point the needs and interests of men cannot rise to the heights of adoring worship of her heavenly Groom. We need Christ-focused worship to accomplish this.

The Church is the temple, nation, servant of the Lord, and agent of the Kingdom of God – the light, salt, and leaven of the world. Believers bring to the world a foretaste of eternity, a glimpse of the resurrection life of Jesus, and they do so together, as communities of His people, always looking forward to the day of His appearing in glory to gather them lovingly and eternally to Himself.

The Lord is coming to receive His Church as His Bride. Beloved, we must make ready. We must show the world that a great wedding is in the offing, and we are the objects of our coming Savior's devotion and love. And we must go into the highways and bi-ways of our lives, living for our coming King and Savior and calling others to come with us to the feast, to join us as His temple, nation, servants, and agents of change, inviting them into the intimacy of Jesus' love and the power of His resurrection life.

Let us, and let our churches, prepare together in holiness, good works, and joyous worship, so that we may be found a suitable and ready Wife for our heavenly King.

For reflection or discussion

1. As you think about being the Bride of Christ, what's the most important aspect of that for you? Why?
2. How can thinking of ourselves as the Bride of Christ help to keep us focused on those "unseen things" which are so important to the life of faith (cf. Heb. 11.1)?
3. What is involved in "making ready" for the great wedding feast toward which we are journeying? How should such preparations affect our relationships with the people in our Personal Mission Fields?
4. What's the most important lesson you've learned from this study?
5. How are you planning to put that lesson to work in your walk with and work for the Lord?

Next steps: To what extent does the imminence of Jesus' return factor in the life and ministry of your church? That is, in your church is there an abiding sense that you are the Bride of Christ, and that, at any moment, the Savior might come and take you for Himself to glory? And how do you as a church prepare for this? Talk with some fellow church members and a church leader or two about these questions.

Prayer:

The Fellowship of Ailbe

The Fellowship of Ailbe is a spiritual fellowship in the Celtic Christian tradition. Our goal is to promote revival, renewal, and awakening, following the teaching of Scripture and the example and heritage of our forebears in the faith.

The Fellowship of Ailbe offers many opportunities for training, prayer, personal growth, and ministry. Visit our website at www.ailbe.org to learn more.

We hope you found this study helpful. If so, please consider making a gift to The Fellowship. You can contribute to our ministry by using the donate button at the website, or by sending your gift to The Fellowship of Ailbe, 19 Tyler Dr., Essex Junction, VT 05452.

Thank you.