

FROM RED LETTER CHALLENGE

REOPENING  
CHRISTIANITY

5 CHALLENGING QUESTIONS  
EVERY CHRISTIAN MUST ANSWER

ZACH ZEHNDER



## **Reopening Christianity: 5 Challenging Questions Every Christian Must Answer**

Copyright © 2021

Red Letter Living LLC

[www.redletterchallenge.com](http://www.redletterchallenge.com)

[www.reopeningchristianity.com](http://www.reopeningchristianity.com)

[hello@redletterchallenge.com](mailto:hello@redletterchallenge.com)

ALL RIGHTS RESERVED.

No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored, or transmitted in any form or by any means—for example, electronic, photocopy or recording—without prior written permission. The only exception is brief quotations in printed reviews. Please encourage and participate in doing the right thing.

All Scripture quotations, unless otherwise noted, are taken from THE HOLY BIBLE, NEW INTERNATIONAL VERSION, NIV, Copyright 1973, 1978, 1984, 2011 by Biblica, Inc. Used by permission. All rights reserved worldwide.

Cover design and book layout by plainjoestudios.com.

Printed in the United States of America.

**To C.R. Zehnder:**

You “burnt the plows” over 100 years ago, and I’m grateful. See you in heaven.

# **TABLE OF CONTENTS**

## INTRODUCTION

1. AM I MOVING FORWARD OR GOING BACKWARD?

2. AM I A CONTRIBUTOR OR A CONSUMER?

3. AM I PLAYING OFFENSE OR DEFENSE?

4. AM I KNOWN FOR WHAT I AM FOR OR AGAINST?

5. AM I WILLING TO FOLLOW JESUS AS MY LORD?

## EPILOGUE

## WHAT NOW?

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

## SMALL GROUP GUIDE

## ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

# INTRODUCTION

We are not a post-Christian nation.

Many people claim that America is no longer a Christian nation. But amazingly, Pew Research says that in 2019, 65% of Americans still claim to be Christians.<sup>1</sup> That's nearly 2 out of every 3 people. We do not have a problem identifying as a Christian. We have a problem actually living up to our calling as Christians. **Many have received Jesus as their Savior, but few live as if He is really their Lord.** We need a new brand of Christians that not only live with hope for the future because Jesus is Savior, but live like He is their Lord today. In other words, we need Christians to actually be greater followers -- or disciples -- of Jesus.

Before a global pandemic had swept our nation and world, our collective witness of Jesus to others was at best a shadow of what it ought to have been. Sadly, the people we are trying to reach sometimes characterize us as the exact opposite of the One that we are pursuing after. How could this be? Jesus is known for grace, good works, unity, and love. His followers have been known for judgment, hypocrisy, division, and hatred. We didn't miss the mark by a little bit. We completely misfired.

In this time where there is still great uncertainty in our world, I am certain the world needs a far greater expression of Jesus Christ.

2020 has been a year filled with debates on reopening strategies. This has been true for businesses, schools, universities, sports programs, and even churches.

A major question I have been pondering is **what if we could reopen Christianity?** How would we reopen? What would we look like? What would we do? What if we could start by acknowledging that we have gone far away from who the God in the Bible has called us to be? What if we could use this time to refocus and come out a stronger representation of who Jesus is?

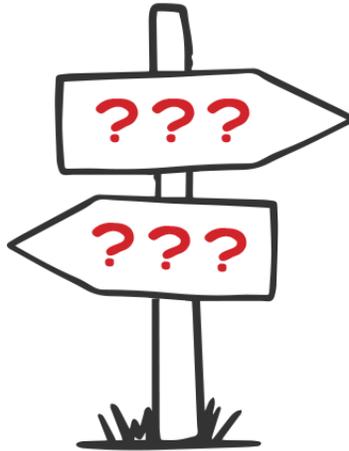
**In a world filled with many good and great answers, Jesus Christ is the best answer.**

And if we could give people the opportunity to experience who Jesus really is, the world would truly change.

Even though 2020 has produced many obstacles, it has also brought an incredible opportunity for us to examine thoroughly what it truly means to be Christian.

This book explores five questions every Christian must answer in this amazing opportunity to reopen Christianity!

Are you ready?



REOPENING CHRISTIANITY

# QUESTION 1

## **AM I MOVING FORWARD OR GOING BACKWARD?**

Ah, the good ol' days of 2019! Can't we just go back to normal? Back to the way it was? Many of us were so excited to flip 2019 into the rear-view mirror and move on to 2020. But after all that has happened, we now are craving the past. We just want to go back.

Human beings are nostalgic. That's why we tend to look at things like Blockbuster and Trapper Keepers in a positive light when, in reality, we live in a better world filled with Netflix and iPads. We like to go back to familiar places in order to revisit the safety and security we had in previous days. As we think about the state of Christianity, nostalgia cannot be our God.

There was a time in the Old Testament when God's people themselves struggled to understand their present and future. They were still pining and thinking about the past. In the book of Exodus, the first 14 chapters describe how God miraculously rescues the Israelites out of Egypt. The Israelites see God move through mighty plagues, the Passover Angel, and even the parting of the Red Sea. They have a front row seat to seeing miracle after miracle of God.

And yet by the time we get to the end of Exodus 15, we see the people of God, who are not even thirty days removed from the slavery they had experienced in Egypt, complaining. They complain about what they nostalgically miss in Egypt. They are ready to go back into slavery to regain what they had in the past. In their flawed memory of the past, they look to their time in Egypt through rose-colored glasses.

What shocks me is how far off their nostalgia led them. They describe their past situation like they were living like kings. They even claimed to sit around pots of meat and eat all that they wanted, even though the reality is they were enslaved and deeply oppressed for more than

four centuries. As this systemic oppression increased, the Pharaoh of their day had issued a decree that killed their baby boys. They were also forced as slaves to produce a larger quota even though the king had taken their supplies. They were suffering greatly.

Not only were they misremembering the past, but they were so blinded by the past that they couldn't see God's miracles in their present. God was still miraculously providing for them. Every single day, He was providing manna and quail from heaven to eat and giving them water from rocks.

Unfortunately, their flawed view of the past led to a misplaced hope in their future as well. Their hope should have been in the Promised Land described as "flowing with milk and honey." (Exodus 33:3) Instead, their hope was to return to the "pots of meat" which never even existed for them.

How could they displace the God of salvation for the nostalgia of their slavery?

It's a real question in the book of Exodus, but they did it, and they did it extravagantly.

It is in these moments of grumbling and complaining that God comes down to rescue them. This is what God still does today. He enters into our suffering and rescues us.

It's easy to wonder how they could misremember so much! How could they complain despite seeing God's constant provision and presence?

In reality, it's what we do, too. It's why many of us cling to the past.

Why do we want to go back to the way it was?

As Christians, we are a shadow at best of who Christ calls us to be. The fastest growing religion in our country for the past few decades now is the "Nones." This isn't the Catholic nuns, but the "N-O-N-E-S," choosing "none" for religious affiliation or "no religion." Even with this sobering statistic, most Americans still mark themselves as "Christian." The majority of those that mark Christian only nominally adhere to Him at best. From the outside, there has been little to no distinguishable difference between a Christian and a non-Christian.

The book *Discipleshift* records these sobering statistics:<sup>2</sup>

- Divorce rates among Christians are about the same as non-Christians.
- Christian men regularly view pornography as often as non-Christian men.
- Christians are more than twice as likely to have racist attitudes as non-Christians.
- Only about 6% of evangelical Christians tithe, meaning give 10% of their income.
- Domestic violence, drug, and alcohol abuse, and most other problems are as prevalent among Christians as among non-Christians.

Is that what we want to go back to?

Even with potentially the greatest economy in the history of the world, depression, anxiety, and mental health issues have all been skyrocketing.

These are pre-pandemic statistics that predictably are all on the rise:

- UC-San Diego says 3 out of 4 Americans were lonely.<sup>3</sup>
- The average American, Evite says, hadn't made a new friend in the last five years.<sup>4</sup>
- CareerBuilder says that 78% of people were living paycheck to paycheck.<sup>5</sup>
- Gallup says that 70% of people were unhappy in their careers.<sup>6</sup>

The resources we so richly have in America cannot be the god of our spiritual lives. The only God worthy of our spiritual souls is the author of all of those resources in the first place.

All of this research leads me to this conclusion: **Many of us would prefer the predictability of the past over the uncertainty of the future**, even if the past wasn't all it was cracked up to be.

Similar to the Israelites, the year 2020 has felt very much like a wilderness experience.

**Underneath every ounce of uncertainty exists an opportunity to trust in the certainty of God's promises.**

Just as the Israelites had a Promised Land that awaited them, so we have a Promised Land that awaits us. Their wilderness had an "other side." The wilderness we are in right now also has an "other side." For them it was Canaan, a land flowing with milk and honey, and more importantly, God's presence. For us, it is heaven, a land filled with peace and harmony, and most importantly, a land filled with the presence and glory of our great God.

There's no more going back.

We have to move forward and aspire to be greater followers of Jesus, not because we have to, but because we want to. We need a new brand of Christianity, one that actually embodies Him to the people we are trying to reach. We will move forward. We will fully trust in God even in uncertainty.

There was a moment later in the story of Exodus where things reached a breaking point.

The complaining and grumbling lead to outright disobedience. Even though the Israelites have daily reminders of God's provision and power, they seek to make their own gods and form a golden calf into an idol. Not only are they worshipping their own gods, but they also are engaging in drunkenness and sexual immorality. They are a far cry from the people of God that they were called to be.

Moses, their fearless leader, descends from the mountain with the newly fashioned tablets. Upon seeing the disobedience of the Israelites, he throws them on the ground and smashes them to pieces. Not only is Moses angry, but God is angry with their disobedience. God

threatens to let the Israelites just be and do their own thing, because -- after all -- it's what they want. But Moses intercedes on the Israelites' behalf and says these words:

***<sup>15</sup> Then Moses said to him, "If your Presence does not go with us, do not send us up from here. <sup>16</sup> How will anyone know that you are pleased with me and with your people unless you go with us? What else will distinguish me and your people from all the other people on the face of the earth?"***

If we are hoping to move forward on our own strength, it's worthless. Our point in moving forward is not to glorify our name or build our little kingdom in this world, but rather to point people to the very Good News of Jesus and to remind them that even in the uncertain wilderness, there is a Promised Land for all of us, too. But none of it even matters if God Himself is not with us. It's important for us to repent and let go of the times we have tried to tread forward on our own strength and invite God into our moving forward. And here's the great news about our God: Whenever we cry out to Him for His presence, He always responds with grace.

***<sup>17</sup> And the Lord said to Moses, "I will do the very thing you have asked, because I am pleased with you and I know you by name."***

In the very next chapter of Exodus, Moses receives new tablets from God. This is what the book of Deuteronomy is all about. Did you know that the book of Deuteronomy typically is translated as the "second law?" Deuteronomy is a book that may be somewhat difficult to read and understand, but at its core it is a beautiful Gospel message that God gives an entire unworthy, underserving people a second chance.

2020 has exposed the breaking point for our nation and at the same time a second opportunity for unworthy, undeserving Christians to live as God has called us to live.

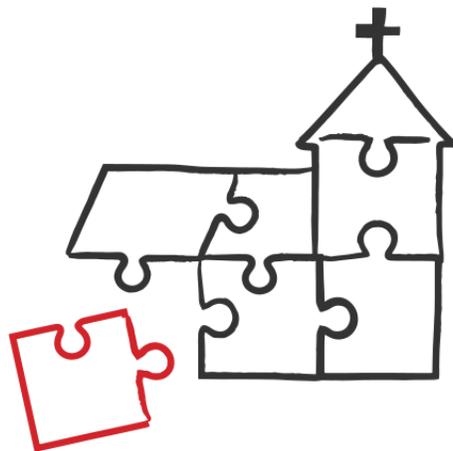
For decades we have been greatly blessed, incredibly prosperous, and overwhelmingly comfortable as a nation. Rather than being grateful to the God who has given all of the bountiful resources to us, we have instead taken our eyes off of Him and began pursuing idols in this world.

Today is the day to call out to Him.

Just as He provided a second chance to the Israelites to move forward with His presence, so, too, does he provide all of us with a second chance to follow Him today. Invite him into your life and your story and even your future. He has never left you or forsaken you, and He never will. As we move forward, know that you do not go alone. You go with the very presence of God!

Are you moving forward or going backward?

**Go deeper:** Join with a small group and use the [Small Group Study Guide](#) found at the end of this book.



REOPENING CHRISTIANITY

## QUESTION 2

### **AM I A CONTRIBUTOR OR A CONSUMER?**

In the typical church about 80% of the work gets done by about 20% of the people. In addition, about 80% of the giving comes from about 20% of the top givers.

Crazily, I have come to find out that this 80/20 thing is actually a thing. There is something apparently known as the 80/20 rule, or the law of the vital few, and it's called the Pareto Principle.<sup>2</sup> Amazingly, it shows up in a lot of places to be quite accurate.

Vilfredo Pareto was an Italian economist who noted the 80/20 connection in his home country. He noticed about 80% of the land in Italy was owned by 20% of the population. This same phenomenon, he found out, is true in much of the world. But not just with land. In 1992, the UN Development Program Report found that the richest 20% in the world own 82.7% of the world's income.

In the US, the top 20% pay 80%+ of the federal income taxes.

In computer science, Microsoft noted that by fixing the top 20% of the most-reported bugs, 80% of the related errors and crashes in a given system would be eliminated. 80% of a certain piece of software can be written in 20% of the total time.

In occupational health and safety, 20% of the hazards cause 80% of the injuries. Even with viruses, 20% of infected individuals are responsible for 80% of transmissions.

80% of crimes are committed by 20% of criminals.

80% of video rentals are from 20% of the titles.

It is an axiom of business management that 80% of sales come from 20% of clients.

As we look to reopen Christianity, it is important to realize that each one of us plays a part.

Collectively, we cannot be the greatest expression of Jesus without being the fullest expression of who Jesus calls us to be.

**We become the fullest expression of Jesus when every person does their part.**

One of the most impactful human decisions that Jesus made in His ministry was the disciples that He chose. He poured into their lives for three years on a day-to-day basis and then left them with the amazing responsibility of leading the church. He didn't leave them empty-handed; He promised to send them with His Spirit inside of them. And with the Spirit causing faith and testifying to our spirit, we in turn become the representation of Jesus to this world.

The apostle Paul expresses the picture of the church and each person doing their part in Ephesians 4:15-16:

***<sup>15</sup> Instead, speaking the truth in love, we will grow to become in every respect the mature body of him who is the head, that is, Christ. <sup>16</sup> From him the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work.***

It is through the church that every Christian can truly contribute to a mission that's larger than themselves.

If our goal in life is to glorify Jesus and represent Him to the best of our ability in this world, and we accomplish this through the church, then this fact is true: **if only 20% of people are doing the work, then we are simply being 20% of the church that we could be.** Our church hasn't become the full expression of Jesus that it could be until all Christians are using their gifts, talents, and resources for the unity and mission of the church.

As we reopen Christianity, it is important for you to see that the church needs you and me to help it become its fullest, greatest expression.

As we explored the first question, I noted that 70% of the people in our country do not enjoy their work or career. They aren't experiencing fulfillment. Another often quoted statistic says that 98% of people die with unfulfilled dreams, and that the biggest regret that people have is not something they've done but something they've failed to do.<sup>3</sup> Purposeless and unfulfilling lives was the old normal, even for a country that is supposedly filled with a majority of Christians.

God has given us purpose, and He's wired us for fulfillment. So, while the church needs you and me to help it become its greatest and fullest expression, here's another important truth:

**The church gives you and me the opportunity to experience the greatest fulfillment in this world.**

In John 4, there's a little-known section of verses in a very well-known story that are key for us to look at.

Jesus and His disciples had been traveling all day, and they stop at a well just outside of a city. His disciples go into the city to look for food while Jesus stays sitting at the well. As Jesus is sitting there, a Samaritan woman comes to draw water from the well. (Samaritans and Jews didn't get along. Samaritans were Jewish people who married foreigners. Because of this, Jews called them half-breeds.) Jesus has a conversation with this woman, and He ends up leading her to faith in Him as the Messiah. Jesus ends His conversation with her right as the disciples return. She runs into the city to spread the word, and here's the conversation that takes place.

<sup>31</sup> **Meanwhile his disciples urged him, "Rabbi, eat something."**

<sup>32</sup> **But he said to them, "I have food to eat that you know nothing about."**<sup>33</sup> **Then his disciples said to each other, "Could someone have brought him food?"**

**- John 4:31-33**

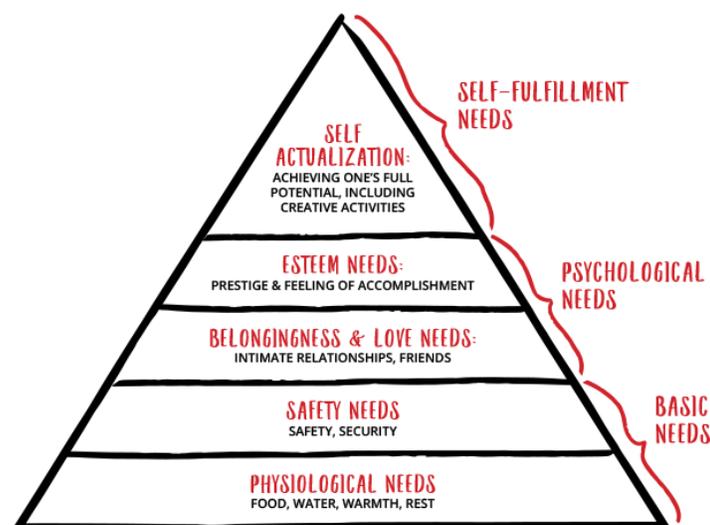
The disciples are confused. It's a Sunday. Did Jesus get Chick-fil-A on a Sunday? How did He do that?! What?!

<sup>34</sup> **"My food," said Jesus, "is to do the will of him who sent me and to finish his work".**

Jesus is saying, "When others are consuming and thinking, 'Fill me, fill me, fill me,' what nourishes Me is pouring into the lives of others." Jesus was declaring that He was there to do the work that God sent Him to do. The disciples were more worried about consuming, but Jesus was more worried about contributing. Jesus felt more revitalized, more rejuvenated, more filled when He was serving others and leading them to faith in Him.

This idea of being fulfilled by serving others and thinking outside of yourself is also taught in psychology.

Decades ago, psychologist Abraham Maslow came up with a pyramid that lists our needs as human beings. As certain needs are met, higher levels of fulfillment are attained.



They taught that the greatest fulfillment you can have is Self-Actualization Needs. In other words, when you have achieved your full potential, nothing is as fulfilling as that. And even though there are things we set out to do that we don't finish, we've likely all had the feeling of setting a goal, working hard towards it, and accomplishing it. That's a really rewarding, fulfilling experience.

But the more psychologists taught this, they realized there was something more fulfilling. In the 1990s, they expanded the pyramid, adding three levels, including one at the top. <sup>2</sup>



Transcendence Needs bring fulfillment. When you who have achieved your full potential actually help someone else achieve theirs, psychology tells us that nothing is more fulfilling.

This psychology example goes completely against our human nature, doesn't it? Sin has turned our perfect attention of serving God and serving others to serving ourselves. At the core of every one of us is sin, and sin makes us self-centered and self-aware. We automatically think of ourselves first. By nature, we are consumers. "Have it your way" comes easy and natural to us. Contributing does not.

Please do not misunderstand; every day we need to consume God's Word to help us be in a right relationship with Him. **Every day consumption of God's Word leads to effective contribution.** But for many Christians, they have been consuming and consuming and consuming, and yet there is still a hunger inside of them. Does this describe you? Do you feel like you have been eating a lot and yet you are still hungry? Why?

**Contribution fills you more than consumption.**

Psychology is just echoing what Jesus taught the disciples by the well that day. We are most fulfilled when we serve and contribute to something that is bigger than ourselves.

And as a Christian, what better way to serve than in the movement in which Jesus Himself instituted called the church.

While the church needs you and me to help it become the fullest, greatest expression of Jesus, we also need the church because it provides us with the opportunity to serve others and gives us fulfillment.

It's a win-win.

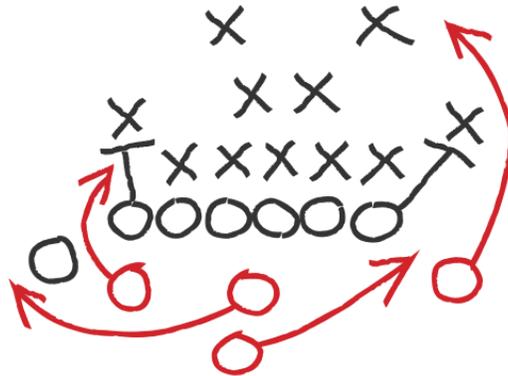
In the words of Michael Scott,<sup>10</sup> it's actually a "win-win-win" because when we truly are doing the work of Jesus, the lives of others in our communities are changed and impacted for the greater as well!

Some of you may feel unworthy to contribute, but remember through Jesus' contribution at the cross, He qualified you and makes you worthy. By Jesus not holding back at 20%, or even 80%, but giving 100%, He completely and wholly qualified you. His contribution not only gives you a salvation that's secure but also an identity as His child that fills you with purpose, meaning, and fulfillment in this world.

And as hard as 2020 has been, the world has never needed Jesus more. It's time to bring Jesus to a world that is in absolute peril.

Are you a contributor or consumer?

**Go deeper:** Join with a small group and use the [Small Group Study Guide](#) found at the end of this book.



REOPENING CHRISTIANITY

## QUESTION 3

### **AM I PLAYING OFFENSE OR DEFENSE?**

As a huge football fan, it is so easy to be an armchair quarterback, especially when your favorite football team is the Cleveland Browns. There's just a lot to question! An armchair quarterback is someone who doesn't participate in the action but still makes judgments about it. I've never played football, so the fact that I would have really strong opinions about the way in which a football team should be run is a little bit ridiculous.

But one of the things that I can't stand as a fan is when a football team is ahead, rather than continuing with the game plan and the strategy that allowed them to get ahead in the first place, they change to a far less aggressive strategy. On defense, many teams when they are ahead will shrink back into what's known as a "prevent defense." The idea is to prevent the offense from making the really big play. They will allow the offense to make little plays and move the ball down the field. A major aim of the prevent defense is to let the clock run out.

The problem with this is that by allowing a lot of these little plays, the offense more easily finds themselves in scoring range.

And I don't know if it's just me and the games that I watch, but it feels like the prevent defense doesn't work. Famous football coach and icon John Madden once said, "The only thing the prevent defense does is prevent you from winning." My guess is we could go back and forth on the merit of this defense strategy in football, but as we look to reopen Christianity, I believe that Christianity as a whole has been playing too much prevent defense.

If the last question helped us see the importance of contribution, this question will dive into more specifically how we can contribute. It starts with a basic premise that I have seen and felt:

Christians must not understand the Gospel.

Gospel means Good News. Christians must not understand it because if they did, it would be the thing on our hearts, minds, and lips every day. Sadly, living in a country where the majority of people still proclaim to be Christian, talking about Jesus and the Good News with others has been far more silenced than proclaimed.

It's time we change that. When you have good news, you share it. You are excited about it. God has been good in each of our stories. He has saved and rescued us from our sin. He has filled us with His Spirit to accomplish great things on behalf of others that fills us with meaning and purpose. And He's secured a place for us with Him in eternity.

It's all Good News no matter if you are looking at the past, present, or future.

Collectively we are losing ground. Not only are numbers declining in all aspects of Christianity, but we are quickly losing our voice and influence. How is this possible not only with the Good News of Jesus in us but also His Spirit inside of us? What do we do?

Let's learn from one of my favorite stories in the Bible: David and Goliath. Typically, the way we teach or think about this story is that David is the underdog and Goliath was the favorite. That's not the way I see it.

In Malcolm Gladwell's book *David and Goliath*, he makes the case that despite popular opinion, David wasn't an underdog at all.

The story begins with two rival camps: the Israelites and the Philistines. Each side had arrived at a valley and lined up and camped out on their own side. The Philistines send their prize fighter, a man named Goliath. This 9-foot-tall master fighter issues a throw-down UFC style fight to any Israelite. The battle outcome has some serious consequences attached to it. Goliath says, "If I win, you worship our gods and serve us. If you win, we worship your God and serve you."

This champion fighter of the Philistines causes fear and panic all throughout the Israelite camp, until a shepherd boy, who comes to deliver Uber Eats to his brothers on the battlefield, hears his smack talk, and says, "Who is this uncircumcised man who defies my God?"

While everybody else is sitting back and playing defense, David says, "No, no, no. Nobody talks about my God that way!"

And from there we mostly teach what a miracle it was that David, the underdog, defeats Goliath, the prize fighter.

But David was never the underdog. First off, he had God on his side. Then, from merely a human perspective, David was never planning on fighting Goliath with swords.

In ancient battle, there was more than one type of warrior. Goliath was a foot soldier, wearing armor, and carrying swords and shields. Another type of warrior is the projectile warrior, what we would call today "archers" or "slingers." Slingshotting took an extraordinary amount of skill and practice, but, in experienced hands like David's, the sling was a devastating weapon.

When Goliath calls out to the Israelites, mocks their God, and asks to fight them, he is wanting to engage in combat with swords and shields. If any Israelite were to fight Goliath in this sort of combat, even with all of his deficiencies, they probably wouldn't stand much of a chance. David never intended to fight Goliath in this manner.

Saul, the king of the Israelites, doesn't even give David a chance to beat this Philistine giant. Saul tells David, "You are too little to fight this giant." But David insists and so Saul tries to give him his armor. It didn't fit, but it didn't matter. David didn't want it or even need it. Why?

Because David was never planning on fighting Goliath in hand-to-hand combat. He was going to flip the script and fight him the way that he knew best...with slinging!

The moment he decided to use stones rather than swords is the moment that Vegas should have flipped the odds in his favor. David was an excellent slinger, and while he picks out five smooth stones, he only needs one to knock down his opponent. Goliath is hit on the forehead, falls to the ground, and is defeated.

If David would have fought Goliath on Goliath's terms, then he certainly would have been an underdog. But he used the gifts that God had not only put inside of him, but that he had been practicing for a while as a shepherd boy.

David understood something that few of us in the church understand. David not only knew that he was called to contribute, but he also knew how to contribute. David understood his gifts. He knew that he wasn't a prize sword fighter; that's not what God called him to be. He called him to be a slinger.

I heard a statistic from a pastor that only 10% of Christians have discovered their spiritual gifts.

**It's one thing to know that you are gifted; it is another to know *how* you are uniquely gifted.**

It's no wonder we have a hard time playing offense. Many of us haven't taken the time and thought to truly reflect on what gifts God has put inside of us that He wants us to use for His glory.

The reason we cannot simply play defense and let status quo happen is because God's been too good to us. We don't do things and accomplish things in this world because we have to, but because we want to.

2020 has shown that whatever control any of us thought we've had is completely bogus. The world pretty much shut down over a virus that no one could physically see. Businesses closed, jobs were lost, loved ones sick, and many of us were quarantined. Whatever semblance or thought of control we had was gone.

I bring this up to remind you that we are not in control. God has an ultimate plan. His desire is that all would be saved. And He reminds us in Scripture over and over again that He will be coming back for us. When? Many have tried to guess, and many have failed. But Jesus says it's soon. There's an urgency to which 2020 has brought. If Jesus is really God, and if He really is coming back, and if I'm truly not in control, then I cannot wait any longer. I've got to go now.

Hockey is a sport I know even less about than football. But I'm intrigued by the strategy of pulling the goalie. When a team is losing near the end of the game, they will pull their goalie from their own net to go on attack mode. They get an advantage with an extra player. The goalie will leave their goal, stop playing defense, and the team will focus all of their energy on offense. There's urgency. The time is short.

We have to live with a sense of urgency. Sometimes in the name of prosperity and comfort and progress, we've taken our eyes off of the fact that Jesus is returning and that we are ultimately citizens in heaven.

When we live with a sense of urgency and a Kingdom perspective, we will not sit back and just let status quo happen. We will pull the goalie and think strategically about how we can be the best offense in the time that's left. It's time for Christians and the church to be filled with people playing offense, identifying where they are gifted, and using those gifts in creative, innovative ways that are relevant to the culture we live in. The time is now.

As we think about contribution and playing offense, many of us will want to just jump up and move. It's important to remember though that our greatest offense we will play in this world is not through our actions, but God working through us. Anytime I try to play offense on my own strength, eventually I fall short.

The truth is that **God can do more in one second than any of us can do in an entire lifetime.**

And while we are called to use our gifts in this world, there is a spiritual battle going on in this world right now. The greatest weapons of offense that we have is God's Word and prayer.

Many people want to change the world by the things that they do, but your greatest offense you can bring and contribution you can make is not something that you do, but someone that you can bring. His name is Jesus. Rather than putting all of our emphasis on doing great things *for* God, let's place even more emphasis on simply being *with* Him and allowing His presence and His power to work *through* us.

As we reopen Christianity remember that, like David, not only do we have gifts to use, but lest we ever think it's about ourselves, we have God's Spirit inside of us as well. And because of that simple fact, you are not and never will be an underdog.

Even if it looks like we are declining or failing, remember that our God writes the last chapter. And because He is the author, strange twists and turns happen.

Get this. In the story of David and Goliath, it was a stone that knocked Goliath to the ground, but it was Goliath's own sword that David used to chop his head off to ultimately destroy him.

Our God is capable of taking the enemy's weapons, the weapons that were meant to destroy us, and turn those weapons designed against us into our greatest weapons of offense.

The cross was the weapon that Satan threw at Jesus. Jesus died and breathed His last. I'm sure the devil laughed. But the battle wasn't over. Three days later Jesus rose from the dead. The cross, meant to kill, became the weapon that Jesus used to free every one of us.

May we know that **even the weapons that have been formed to be used *against* us, in the hands of our God are powerful weapons of offense *for* us.**

If God is for us, who can be against us?

Let's go!

Are you playing offense or defense?

**Go deeper:** Join with a small group and use the [Small Group Study Guide](#) found at the end of this book.



REOPENING CHRISTIANITY

## QUESTION 4

### **AM I KNOWN FOR WHAT I AM FOR OR AGAINST?**

I mentioned in the introduction that Christians are not known for the same words as Jesus. Judgmental, hypocritical, old-fashioned, political, out-of-touch, prejudiced, and bigoted are all words that get tossed around to describe Christians.

In the last question, we challenged you to take the Good News of Jesus along with the unique gifts He's put inside of you to others. But it's tough to do a good job of spreading the Good News if we don't have a good reputation. You've probably heard the phrase, "People don't care how much you know until they know how much you care." If we have the message that they need but there is an inherent lack of trust, they may never truly receive it.

We have to change our reputation.

The first thing you might do when you hear this is refute their feelings. You might feel that they are wrong. You may want to point them to all of the good deeds that Christians do. You go through your list that Christians are the first in line and most helpful in disaster relief, they've brought clean water to so many villages, and have been working on prison reform for decades. You might point to hostile media characterizations and think that that's why the non-Christians say those ugly things about us.

Barna Research found that more than half of the respondents that had used those harsh words to describe Christians based it on personal experiences with Christians.<sup>11</sup>

And let's state the obvious: if 65% of Americans claim to be Christian, then out of the 215 million of us, there are going to be a few crazy ones who twist the Word of God and live a poor representation of Jesus.

But in reality, we are all sinful, broken, and messy people. That includes me and that includes you. We have to admit that we don't always do things right, and we also don't always do everything that we should do. It is easy for us to jump to judging others. Because we tie ourselves to a particular moral standard, to a higher level of obedience, when we see others not following suit it's easy to lash out in judgment.

Grace, after being received, should always extend out to more grace. Unfortunately, some turn and after receiving the grace of God they can become judgmental. Even though we are all guilty, God has declared us righteous. It's something we didn't earn or deserve. Once we hear the gavel from the judge declaring us innocent, many of us walk out of the courtroom with an initial sigh of relief, followed by a pursuit to prove the judge right. We think, "If he declared me innocent, by golly, I'll prove him right." On our path to obedience we get bothered by those who aren't "trying." We have a mentality that if I have to live up to these standards, then so should others.

Trying to prove our worth and earn a favor in which God has already given to us is a prison that leads to very dark places. When God gave us grace, He brought us into the light so we wouldn't have to live in darkness.

This darkness leads us to live a life of judgment and not grace.

Jesus came to bring both grace and truth, but many Christians skip the grace and go right to the truth. As we reopen Christianity, we have an opportunity to be known for what we are for and not what we are against. And what we are for is Jesus and His redemption for all people, no matter what race, age, gender, or spiritual qualifications they may or may not possess.

In the midst of a pandemic that shut the world down, racial injustice and systemic oppression reared its ugly head again, and it caused great division.

Perhaps the greatest invitation we have to flip our reputation lies in our ability to be a part of the current day injustices that are before us.

Sadly, though, with the particular issue of racism, many Christians feel like because they are not racist, that this is not their problem.

The moment you signed up to follow Jesus, fighting against any sin became your problem. It's when we stand up against sin that we proclaim who we are for, and His name is Jesus.

In our pursuit of being known for what we are for, this particular situation is one of a few that I believe could genuinely help our reputation, and at the same time, bring much needed reconciliation to a systemic issue in our nation.

When it comes to being known what we are for, I believe it starts with reconciliation in this world. I want to explore six biblical steps that we are called to take in reconciliation. These six

steps should work in any form of reconciliation, but I want to use the injustice of racism to help shape this challenging question.

## PLEASE

**P — Pray**

**L — Listen**

**E — Educate**

**A — Act**

**S — Speak**

**E — Expect**

## PRAY

When it comes to changing our reputation through reconciliation, this is the first step we take. Remember, prayer is not our last line of defense, it is our first line of offense.

2 Chronicles 7:14 says this: ***if my people, who are called by my name, will humble themselves and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven, and I will forgive their sin and will heal their land.***

The reason this step is first is because we need help from heaven. Racism is ultimately not a skin problem. It is a sin problem. If we are going out to seek reconciliation on our own efforts, it will be futile. God's power must be involved.

## LISTEN

Injustice creates emotions in us. We hear about so much injustice from every nook, cranny, and crevice of the world that we can become desensitized or overwhelmed by it all. As we seek to regain our reputation, it's important for us to enter into a real relationship with someone who is different than us.

It's important to listen to someone real that you know because we cannot trust everything that we read online. A study by MIT declared that fake news on Twitter spreads six times as fast as real news.<sup>12</sup>

King Solomon gave wise words in Proverbs 18:13: ***To answer before listening—that is folly and shame.***

Injustice becomes real when on the other side of the injustice is a person you know. For you to truly enter into reconciliation, it requires that you would walk to the other side to gain

understanding. **Reconciliation requires both parties, but it is the Christian's responsibility to walk to the other side first.**

## **EDUCATE**

Often the reasons Christians can come off as judgmental is because they haven't taken the time to educate themselves. Everyone in this world has a story, and oftentimes, a person's story has great influence on why they are the way that they are.

King Solomon again said this in Proverbs 18:2: ***Fools find no pleasure in understanding, but delight in airing their own opinions.***

Just as it's important to educate ourselves by listening to each individual person, it's also wise to educate ourselves in past matters so that we can bring God's grace into a situation.

It's important for Christians to get outside of the bubbles that are so easy to make for ourselves and truly educate ourselves on the people we are trying to reach.

## **ACT**

Many Christians don't believe they are a part of the problem here. This is for someone else. Even with the timely issue of racism, Barna Research, a Christian research group, did a study in 2016 in the wake of Black Lives Matter movement and came to this conclusion:

"Our research confirms the fear that the church (or the people in it) may be part of the problem in the hard work of racial reconciliation. If you're a white, evangelical Republican, you are less likely to think race is a problem, but more likely to think you are a *victim* of reverse racism. You are also less convinced that people of color are socially disadvantaged. Yet these same groups believe the church plays an important role in reconciliation. This dilemma demonstrates that those supposedly most equipped for reconciliation *do not see the need for it.*"<sup>13</sup>

I was hopeful that in all things 2020 that perhaps we would have made progress on the quote above. Astonishingly, Barna Research did more polls in the midst of all of the racial tension of 2020, and found that the percentage of practicing Christians nearly doubled from 17% to 30% that are unmotivated or not at all motivated to be a part of the solution when it comes to racial reconciliation.<sup>14</sup>

This is so sad that a people group is crying out, and we who have received God's grace cannot extend grace to those who are hurting. The truth is that God has acted on our behalf while we were still sinners, and very plainly tells us that we are called to act as well.

The apostle Paul would say these words in 2 Corinthians 5:17-20a:

***<sup>17</sup> Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come: The old has gone, the new is here! <sup>18</sup> All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation: <sup>19</sup> that God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting people's sins against them. And he has***

***committed to us the message of reconciliation. <sup>20</sup> We are therefore Christ's ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us.***

Again, all parties need to act for ultimate reconciliation to occur, but Christians should never hesitate on being the first to act. Jesus proactively acted in each of our stories.

## **SPEAK**

Sadly, this is most people's first step. And it shouldn't be. It's important to speak, but the order is important.

Prayer, Listening, Education, and Action should all come before speaking. We are called to speak, but it's after action. Why?

**Actions before words make your words more powerful.**

Rather than using our voices to divide, let's use them to unify. Rather than blaming others or giving judgment to others, let's come together under Jesus.

D.L Moody once said:” **You may find hundreds of faultfinders among professed Christians but all of their criticism will never lead one solitary soul to Christ.**”<sup>15</sup>

Christians should be the first to speak up and say that racism is real. You can be wholeheartedly against racism and injustice and wholeheartedly for honorable police officers. You don't have to choose sides. But you do need to speak truth. Racism is real. And it's wrong. Even if you haven't seen it, it doesn't mean that it doesn't exist. Until we acknowledge the problem, we can't be part of the solution. We have to acknowledge it.

## **EXPECT**

Expect for God to move mightily when you invite God's presence into injustice, make relationships with others, and then use your unique actions and voice that God has given to you.

Even though Christianity and our reputation has been on the decline for some time, never forget that we have a God who has a history of coming down and making a way when there is no way.

When God turns His eyes towards injustice, injustice flees. It cowers. It leaves. Darkness cannot exist in the light.

Remember the first issue that we explored: the Israelites had been systemically oppressed and enslaved for four centuries until God couldn't take it any longer. He came down and used a mighty man named Moses to do the work of rescue. God has seen systemic oppression, brutal violence and injustice for four centuries in our country. He has turned His eye against this injustice. Like He called Moses, He is calling all Christians today to do the work of reconciliation. When we do this work and bring Jesus' grace into the dark places, then we will be known for what we are for rather than what we are against.

Be encouraged by these powerful words from Ephesians 2:13-20:

***But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far away have been brought near by the blood of Christ.***

***<sup>14</sup>For he himself is our peace, who has made the two groups one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility... His purpose was to create in himself one new humanity out of the two, thus making peace, <sup>16</sup>and in one body to reconcile both of them to God through the cross, by which he put to death their hostility. <sup>17</sup>He came and preached peace to you who were far away and peace to those who were near. <sup>18</sup>For through him we both have access to the Father by one Spirit.***

***<sup>19</sup>Consequently, you are no longer foreigners and strangers, but fellow citizens with God's people and also members of his household, <sup>20</sup>built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone.***

The challenge we face in this world as Christians is that we are called to stand up against injustice and at the same time to stand up for Jesus. We cannot escape this world. The “cancel culture” mindset that has become popular is something that Christians must avoid at all costs. It shows no grace and only judgment. And yet, at the same time, we cannot embrace everything in this world. The world is beautiful, but it is messy, sinful, and broken.

A Christian research company found that those who were most likely to spread the Good News had a regular practice of confession in their lives. Those most willing to talk about and spread the Good News of Jesus started with an understanding that they are the one most in need of God's grace.<sup>16</sup>

It's when we come from that place, that we ourselves were broken until Christ made us whole, that we can truly be the light in the darkness that Jesus is asking us to be. Rather than leading with judgment and what we are against, we must lead with grace just like Jesus did for you and for me.

We are called to stand in the middle. And in the middle, we Pray, Listen, Educate, Act, Speak, and Expect. And even though the middle is typically messy, we know that **the mess is where God always does His best work.**

Are you known for what you are for or what you are against?

**Go deeper:** Join with a small group and use the [Small Group Study Guide](#) found at the end of this book.



REOPENING CHRISTIANITY

## QUESTION 5

### AM I WILLING TO FOLLOW JESUS AS MY LORD?

The number one command of Jesus to His followers is *“to love God with all of your heart, soul, mind, and strength.”* Collectively, I think we all need to admit we’ve fallen way short of this command.

Here’s what I’m convinced is the major problem with American Christianity: **Christians in America are content with God being their Savior, but uncomfortable with Him being their Lord.**

In the King James Version, which is the most widely used translation of the Bible in America, the word Savior appears 37 times. The word Lord appears more than 7000 times. I wonder if God isn’t trying to tell us something with those numbers.

Many Christians have settled for a relationship with Jesus where He is their Savior but not truly their Lord. Many Christians like the benefits, especially eternally, that Jesus as Savior brings, but would prefer to continue to pursue comfort in the things of this world. Until we live first and foremost for Jesus and Jesus alone, we will continue to be a poor representation of Jesus in this world.

At the root of it all is that in this world there are things that compete for the place where God is meant to reside, your heart. The deeper we look into the Bible, we may balk at and deem ourselves superior to the Israelite people who crafted idols out of materials, but in reality, we do the very same things. We craft idols and pursue other than Jesus and wonder why we aren’t making the impact that we ought to be making.

So, Christian, who or what are you most in love with? Who, or what, resides in the throne room of your heart? Anytime anyone or anything replaces Jesus as our ultimate pursuit in this world, we will always woefully fall short.

The number one “well” that American Christians have been running to that has proven to be empty is ourselves.

The first sermon I preached in 2020 to my church (before anyone had heard about coronavirus) was entitled “Death to Selfie.” I noted the rise in selfie use in our world. It used to be when you took a lot of pictures of yourself that you were called a narcissist. Now taking a lot of pictures of yourself is called social media and brand development. What was considered narcissism in our past is considered normal today.

When we stay stuck on ourselves, or becoming a better version of ourselves, as our main pursuit in life, we’ll always come up empty. There will always be something we can improve on and something we aren’t happy about. Many of us have been trying to be a better version of ourselves for how long now, and we still aren’t there, right? Even at our best, Romans 3:10 declares that not one of us can be righteous on our own.

Americans have been sold a lie called the “American Dream.” We believe that when we work hard, pull our bootstraps up, and climb to the top that we will then be happy. I see nothing wrong with hard work and high aspirations, and the freedom to pursue our goals is something we should celebrate. But underlying this dream is an incredibly dangerous assumption. David Platt, in his book *Radical*, says: **“The dangerous assumption we unknowingly accept in the American Dream is that our greatest asset is our own ability.”**<sup>17</sup>

Our country has experienced much success over the past decades, and so it’s easy to look to ourselves and trust in our own ability. At the end of the American Dream is that we would “be recognized by others for what we really are.” The goal of the American Dream is to make much of ourselves.

This couldn’t be further from the truth of the Gospel. The Gospel has different priorities. The Gospel beckons us to die to ourselves and to believe in God and to trust in His power. In the Gospel, God confronts us with our utter inability to accomplish anything of value apart from Him. We cannot even come to faith; we are dry, dead bones, without God Himself breathing new life into us. **The goal of the Gospel is to make much of God, not to make much of ourselves.**

In direct contradiction to the American dream, God actually delights in exalting our inability. He puts us in situations that are way too big for ourselves, puts us in situations we are unqualified and unworthy to hold, situations where we come face to face with our need for Him, and He shows up time and time again. He does this not for us to get the glory, but so that He would receive all the glory.

Platt continues in his book *Radical* to describe how Christianity has changed over time to a far more comfortable version.

“We are giving in to the dangerous temptation to take the Jesus of the Bible and twist Him into a version of Jesus we are more comfortable with. A Jesus who doesn’t mind materialism and

who would never call us to give away everything we have. A Jesus who is fine with nominal devotion that does not infringe on our comforts, because, after all, He loves us just the way we are. A Jesus who wants us to be balanced, who wants us to avoid dangerous extremes, and who, for that matter, wants us to avoid danger altogether. A Jesus who brings us comfort and prosperity as we live out the Christian spin on the American Dream.”<sup>18</sup>

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a German Lutheran theologian struggling to follow Christ in the midst of Nazi rule, penned one of the great Christian books of all time, *The Cost of Discipleship*. The theme of this book is summarized in one sentence: **“When Christ calls a man, he bids him come and die.”**<sup>19</sup>

When we follow Jesus as Lord, we give up the right to call our own shots. He calls them for us. It’s not an easy lifestyle that Jesus offers to us. It comes with cost and with sacrifice. But, friends, it is worth it. Die to yourself and switch away from selfie view and place your gaze on someone most worthy. His name is Jesus Christ.

And the opportunity is right here, right now. In the midst of a crazy world-turned-upside-down global pandemic year, the time is now. How will you respond? I hope you respond like Elisha.

Read the story from 1 Kings, chapter 19:

***<sup>19</sup> So Elijah went from there and found Elisha son of Shaphat. He was plowing with twelve yoke of oxen, and he himself was driving the twelfth pair. Elijah went up to him and threw his cloak around him. <sup>20</sup> Elisha then left his oxen and ran after Elijah. “Let me kiss my father and mother goodbye,” he said, “and then I will come with you.”***

***“Go back,” Elijah replied. “What have I done to you?”***

Elisha was a man working his fields by driving the last pair of oxen. By all accounts, he was a pretty successful guy. The fact that he had 12 pair of oxen and that he was driving the last pair was an indication that he had quite a bit of worldly wealth and position. But all of a sudden, out of nowhere, Elijah, the most powerful, faith-filled prophet of his day, came by and threw his cloak around Elisha.

Placing a prophetic cloak around someone was like a king giving his scepter to his son. It was a divine calling. Elijah was offering Elisha a job. It wasn’t as if Elisha was looking for a new job. The Bible doesn’t tell us that he had done anything of note to be put in this position. But all of a sudden, he had a choice to make. He could stay with the oxen and keep plowing the farm, or he could follow the man that in the chapter before was calling down fire from heaven and had just won a battle single-handedly against 850 false prophets.

Invitations like this don’t come by too often.

Elisha responded that he first wanted to say good-bye to his parents. Following Jesus as your Lord often times can lead to painful separation from the things of the world and sometimes even from our own flesh and blood, but there is joy in recompense that outweighs the cost. Elisha would miss his family, and they would miss him.

***21 So Elisha left him and went back. He took his yoke of oxen and slaughtered them. He burned the plowing equipment to cook the meat and gave it to the people, and they ate. Then he set out to follow Elijah and became his servant.***

While animal sacrifice was a common thing in his day, burning the plows to cook the meat was anything but normal. Why would he do this?

I can understand the value in feeding everyone. But to take the instruments of your livelihood and use them for fire so you can grill the oxen is irresponsible, shortsighted, and over the top. If God called you to quit your business, you wouldn't burn your building to the ground.

God didn't put this story in the Bible to teach us how to best steward our farming equipment.

It's a picture of total devotion.

Elisha was proclaiming through his actions in that moment that nothing from his past, not even the good things, will hinder him from truly following after God in the future. He had nowhere back to run to if things didn't work out. He was fully devoted.

Many of us try to pursue Jesus with one foot in and our hand on the door handle back just in case. But Elisha knew this invitation was too good to pass up. He knew there would be danger that would come his way. He knew it would require sacrifice. But he knew it was worth it.

**Living a life of purpose and meaning has costs, but it's always worth it.** Elisha would have to pay those costs. In fact, there's biblical record of years of following after Elijah where he didn't do anything of note. But at the proper time, after following faithfully, amazingly Elisha performed twice as many miracles as Elijah.

**Many people never get to truly experience the joy of following Jesus because they don't leave good enough behind.** Jesus is better than you, and He's better than anything of this world.

And much like Elijah called Elisha, Jesus had a habit of going around with an invitation, ***"Come, follow me."*** He did it with Peter, James, and John on the shore. He did it with a tax collector named Matthew.

And He's doing it for you today. Even though we have failed and misrepresented Him, the invitation is still there today.

**Following Jesus is not a burden but the single greatest opportunity of our lifetimes.**

The great theologian Dallas Willard said, **"The greatest issue facing the world today, with all its heartbreaking needs, is whether those who, by profession or culture, are identified as 'Christians' will become disciples—students, apprentices, practitioners—of Jesus Christ, steadily learning from Him how to live the life of the Kingdom of the Heavens into every corner of human existence."**<sup>20</sup>

Burn the plows. Leave the past behind. Embrace Him fully. Let Jesus be the Lord of your life.

And together let's reopen Christianity in order that the world might see who Jesus truly is.

Are you willing to follow Jesus as your Lord?

**Go deeper:** Join with a small group and use the Small Group Study Guide found at the end of this book.

# EPILOGUE

The amazing invitation to follow Jesus as Lord means not only is our present life filled with meaning and purpose, but the life we live today can impact future generations of Christians.

As noted in the last chapter, Elisha performed double the miracles of his predecessor Elijah. His final miracle, amazingly though, didn't happen until after he had died.

2 Kings 13:20-21 says this, ***“Elisha died and was buried. Now Moabite raiders used to enter the country every spring. 21 Once while some Israelites were burying a man, suddenly they saw a band of raiders; so they threw the man's body into Elisha's tomb. When the body touched Elisha's bones, the man came to life and stood up on his feet.”***

That's all we have from this crazy and unique story. We do not know much of the context or what happened after this took place. Perhaps the Moabite raiders saw this incident and left in fear and trembling.

It's important to note that any miracle that we may perform is not about us, but God working through us. With that being said, I believe that when we live a life pursuing God, He has the ability to use our lives and turn them into incredible legacies. Even though our bones may be underground, His Word and His grace have the ability to use not only what is present, but also what is past.

Elisha's bones not only gave life to a fellow Israelite, but here we are still thousands of years later, looking at his incredible example. It's still inspiring us today.

Over 100 years ago my great-grandfather C.R. Zehnder said “Yes” to the call to not only follow Jesus, but to become a pastor. Since then, my grandfather Ronald, my father Mark, and myself have all followed suit. Along with these amazing men of God come even more amazing women of faith.

I can't help but wonder where I would be and what my life would look like if my great-grandfather didn't burn the plows of this world and live for Jesus. I'm grateful for the work and decisions that he made that I believe are still impacting me today.

I'm grateful that the Holy Spirit stirred in my great-grandfather's heart. That stirring followed by a lifetime of decisions that he made over 100 years ago to follow Jesus as Lord is still creating ripple effects today.

I am hopeful that as we reopen Christianity as a whole, and even if we may not see everything come to fruition, that there might be plows burnt, invitations received, and hearts stirred by the Holy Spirit that will create many ripple effects 100 years from now.

We have a great opportunity to reopen Christianity, and it all starts with an invitation to follow Jesus.

Will you?



## WHAT NOW?

It's one thing to have the desire or intent to follow Jesus. It's another to truly follow Him. My challenge for you is to continue to take a step, each day, in the direction that leads to Jesus.

Our team at Red Letter Challenge is happy to help identify what some of those next steps could be. We've created a FREE assessment at [www.redletterchallenge.com/assessment](http://www.redletterchallenge.com/assessment) that will give you an accurate picture of how you are following Jesus and some next steps to help you become a greater follower of Jesus. Keep stepping!



## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Zach Zehnder is a husband, father, speaker, author, and pastor. His life mission is to challenge people of all ages to become greater followers of Jesus. Zach continues to seek new and innovative ways to share the Gospel with the world, from raising money to buy a recovery house by breaking a Guinness World Record for the Longest Speech Marathon to paying for the church logo to be tattooed on church members. In 2017, Zach wrote the bestselling book *Red Letter Challenge* and together with his wife Allison, in 2019, co-wrote *Red Letter Challenge Kids*. In 2020, Zach wrote *Being Challenge* and co-authored *Being Challenge Kids*. In addition to writing books, you can regularly find Zach and Allison blogging and speaking about the importance of Jesus at [www.redletterchallenge.com](http://www.redletterchallenge.com).

# ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

These great people turned a good idea into a great study. I'm so grateful for all of you:

My pastor friends SS, BT, RG, BH, and JJ who helped me crystallize this idea first into a sermon series.

Allison for being my main thought influencer.

Andrea for your devotion on all things behind-the-scenes.

My video team Kevin, Mark, Mark, Chris, and Amanda who made some incredible small group videos to go with this study.

RightNow Media and David Stidham who have helped promote this project on their platform.

Steve, Susan, and Pat at Blount Collective for their help editing and distributing.

The team at PlainJoe Studios for their design and marketing.

# SMALL GROUP STUDY GUIDE

Go over the Commit to Community Promise together. Make sure everyone understands the commitment.

## COMMIT TO COMMUNITY PROMISE:

I commit to these basic promises. This is my “ALL IN” pledge to be committed to this community and to be helpful to one another.

- **I will be on time and show up with my whole heart.**
- **I understand that this group is 100% confidential. Whatever is shared in the group stays in the group.**
- **I will respect other community members by participating openly and speaking honestly, without dominating the discussions.**
- **I will not try to fix people, preach a sermon, or give unsolicited advice.**
- **When I share in the group, I will share primarily about myself and not about others.**
- **I will trust God to work in all of us as we Reopen Christianity together!**

**Leaders:** View the Small Group Guide Appendix for ideas on how to take your small group time to the next level!

# **SMALL GROUP SECTION 1:**

## **AM I MOVING FORWARD OR GOING BACKWARD?**

### **Prep Work**

Read Introduction and Chapter 1 of *Reopening Christianity*.

### **Icebreaker**

If you could go back in time, which period would you choose? Why?

### **View Video 1**

### **Study Scripture**

- Exodus 6:1-8
- Exodus 16:1-18
- Exodus 19:3-6

### **Discussion Questions**

1. Would you describe yourself as a Christian? Explain.
2. What memories or experiences fill you with nostalgia?
3. Do you tend to think of the past, present, or future more? Explain.
4. When you reflect on your life, do you feel God has been faithful to you? Explain.
5. Like the Israelites, a flawed view of the past can lead us to mistrust God's promises of the future. Is there a particular promise of God that you have a hard time believing? Explain.
6. Alongside of obstacles come opportunities. Is there a great opportunity for you personally to make a change when it comes to your faith or relationship with God? Explain.
7. What is one thing about your past that you can repurpose and bring forward?
8. Read Exodus 32-33:17. Even though the Israelites sinned against God, He gave them a second chance. God always gives second chances when we call out to Him. Agree or disagree, and explain.
9. What are you most looking forward to in this present life or eternity?
10. Are you moving forward or going backward?

### **Prayer**

Dear God, in the past I have missed Your miracles and provision in my life. I am sorry that I have not always represented You well in my present. As I look back and see Your faithfulness, help me to move forward confidently and boldly into the future with You as my Guide. Amen.

## **SMALL GROUP SECTION 2: AM I A CONTRIBUTOR OR A CONSUMER?**

### **Prep Work**

Read Chapter 2 of *Reopening Christianity*.

### **Icebreaker**

If you had \$10 to spend on one meal, what would it be?

### **View Video 2**

### **Study Scripture**

- John 4:31-34
- 1 Corinthians 12

### **Discussion Questions**

1. What are your rhythms, habits, or disciplines that help you consume spiritually?
2. Has there ever been a spiritual season where you consumed but were still feeling hungry or empty?
3. As you look at Abraham Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, do you agree or disagree that transcendence needs lead to the most fulfillment in this world? Talk about a time in your life where you helped someone else reach their full potential and how that made you feel.
4. Zach said: **"While the church needs you to help it become the fullest, greatest expression of Jesus, you also need the church because it provides you with an opportunity to live out your calling and experience the greatest fulfillment you can have in this world."** Agree or disagree, and explain.
5. Jesus instituted the church. Today, many Christians and non-Christians have a negative view of the church because of a damaging interaction with a church in the past. Has the church helped or hurt you in your relationship with God? Explain.
6. Read Ephesians 4:11-16. The author Paul claims that we become the mature body of Christ when every part does its work. What do you feel is the greatest spiritual contribution that you can make in this world, and why?
7. Are there other ways moving forward that you can challenge yourself to contribute?
8. Are you a contributor or a consumer?

### **Prayer**

Dear God, please help me instill rhythms in my life to consume more and more of You. Guide my time spent to result in doing my part to express You more fully in this world. Thank You for allowing me to be a part of Your plan to redeem the world. Amen.

### **Homework**

In preparation for the next small group gathering, take a spiritual gift test. Visit [www.reopeningchristianity.com](http://www.reopeningchristianity.com) to find a spiritual gift test.

## **SMALL GROUP SECTION 3: AM I PLAYING OFFENSE OR DEFENSE?**

### **Prep Work**

Read Chapter 3 of *Reopening Christianity*.

### **Icebreaker**

What is a topic or subject that you are opinionated about but aren't an expert in?

### **View Video 3**

### **Study Scripture**

- 1 Samuel 17

### **Discussion Questions**

1. In life, are you more inclined to play offense or defense, and why?
2. Zach made the argument that David wasn't an underdog in his fight with Goliath. Agree or disagree, and explain.
3. Read Psalm 23. Among other things, David describes being in a valley of death, being led by still waters, and being anointed in the presence of his enemies. Is it possible that David could have written the most popular Psalm in reference to the battle of David and Goliath? If so, would this change the way you understand Psalm 23 in any way?
4. Last week your homework was to take a spiritual gift test. If comfortable, share with the group what your top 3 spiritual gifts are and something tangible you can do to use those gifts.
5. Read Isaiah 54:17. God will often use your pain and suffering to help bring purpose and meaning in your life. Has God used your difficult moments of pain and suffering, things that were meant to slow you down, to help instead move you forward in the future? If so, explain.
6. Read Romans 8:31-39. Is there anything holding you back from moving forward spiritually in confidence? If so, explain.
7. Are you playing offense or defense?

### **Prayer**

Dear God, You have put unique gifts inside of me. Help me to live with a sense of urgency in this world and use my gifts to share the Good News of Jesus with others. Thank You for Your promise to never leave me as I move forward confidently and boldly. Amen.

## **SMALL GROUP SECTION 4: AM I KNOWN FOR WHAT I AM FOR OR AGAINST?**

### **Prep Work**

Read Chapter 4 of *Reopening Christianity*.

### **Icebreaker**

What is a company, business, or brand that you will support no matter what? How has this company, business, or brand instilled a good reputation with you?

### **View Video 4**

### **Study Scripture**

- John 8:1-11

### **Discussion Questions**

1. Judgmental, hypocritical, old-fashioned, political, out-of-touch, prejudiced, and bigoted are all words that get tossed around to describe Christians. Is this a fair or unfair assessment? Explain.
2. Where do you see the positive or negative influence of Christianity most in this world?
3. Read John 1:17. This verse declares that Jesus came into this world to lead with both grace and truth. What are the dangers of leading with only grace or only truth?
4. As you look at Christianity as a whole, have Christians been more prone to lead with grace or truth?
5. In the earlier Scripture reading of Jesus and the adulterous woman, what can we learn from the example of Jesus?
6. As we reopen Christianity, does the world need more grace or more truth from Christians?
7. Zach said, **“We cannot fully escape this world. We cannot support the “cancel culture” movement, and at the same time, we cannot fully embrace this world. We are living in the middle.”** Agree or disagree.
8. How can Christians stand up against injustice and at the same time stand up for Jesus?
9. Are you known for what you are for or what you are against?

### **Prayer**

Dear God, I am sorry that I have missed the mark and contributed to a poor representation of Jesus and a poor reputation of Christians. I acknowledge that I am fully in need of Your grace in my life. As I receive Your grace, help me give that grace to others through my words and actions. Amen.

## **SMALL GROUP SECTION 5: AM I WILLING TO FOLLOW JESUS AS MY LORD?**

### **Prep Work**

Read Chapter 5 and the Epilogue of *Reopening Christianity*.

### **Icebreaker**

Describe a great opportunity you've had in this world and why it was so special for you.

### **View Video 5**

### **Study Scripture**

- 1 Kings 19:19-21
- 2 Kings 13:20-21

### **Discussion Questions**

1. Zach said this may be the most challenging of all five questions. Agree or disagree, and explain.
2. What do you most love about having Jesus as your God?
3. Zach said the main problem with American Christianity is this: **“Christians in America are content with God being their Savior but uncomfortable with Him being their Lord.”** Agree or disagree, and explain.
4. In the King James Version, the most widely used translation of the Bible in America, the word Savior appears 37 times. The word Lord appears more than 7000 times. What can we learn from this statistic?
5. Is it possible to fulfill the American Dream and truly follow Jesus? Explain.
6. Read Matthew 4:18-22. Why would Peter, Andrew, James, and John immediately follow Jesus? Do you believe the invitation to follow Jesus is for you? Explain.
7. Is there anything holding you back from “burning the plows” and truly following Jesus?
8. Zach said: **“Following Jesus is not a burden but the single greatest opportunity of our lifetimes.”** Agree or disagree, and explain.
9. Are you willing to follow Jesus as your Lord?

### **Prayer**

Dear God, I'm sorry for the times I've failed to love You fully. Please help me as I move forward to not just believe in You as my Savior, but to truly follow You as my Lord. You are worth whatever cost may come in this world, and I will faithfully follow You all the days of my life. Amen.

## **SMALL GROUP GUIDE APPENDIX: TAKE YOUR GROUP TO THE NEXT LEVEL**

### **Week 1:**

Have everyone bring a nostalgic item to the group for “show and tell”

### **Week 2:**

Organize a meal to consume, but ask each person/couple to contribute

### **Week 3:**

Play a game together as a group

### **Week 4:**

After group discussion, organize a group project that will help represent Jesus in your community

### **Week 5:**

Have a bonfire and roast some marshmallows or hot dogs

Have other creative ideas for how you lead a *Reopening Christianity* small group? Post ideas, pictures, and more on social media using #ReopeningChristianity.

FROM RED LETTER CHALLENGE

# BEING

---

## CHALLENGE

READY TO  
CHALLENGE YOUR CHURCH?



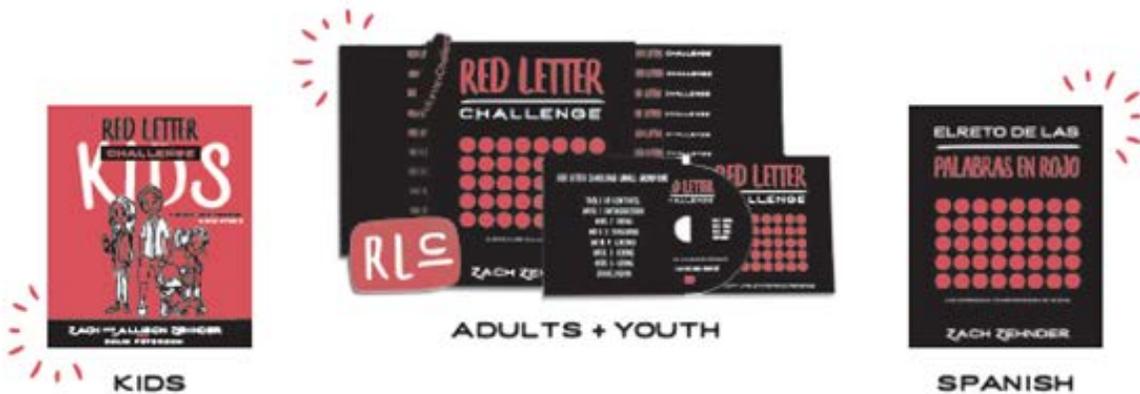
[WWW.BEINGCHALLENGE.COM/CHURCH](http://WWW.BEINGCHALLENGE.COM/CHURCH)

**GET BULK PRICING + FREE STUFF:**

- SERMON MANUSCRIPTS
- SMALL GROUP GUIDES + VIDEOS
- GRAPHICS PACKAGE
- KIDS CURRICULUM AND MORE!

# RED LETTER CHALLENGE

READY TO TAKE ON THE NEXT CHALLENGE?



40-DAYS OF PUTTING JESUS' WORDS INTO PRACTICE!

- 40% GROWTH IN SMALL GROUPS
- CHILDREN'S CHURCH CURRICULUM
- SMALL GROUP VIDEOS + GUIDES
- SOCIAL MEDIA GRAPHICS PACKAGE
- SERMON VIDEOS + MANUSCRIPTS
- BULK DISCOUNTS + SWEET SWAG!



[REDLETTERCHALLENGE.COM/CHURCH](https://redletterchallenge.com/church)

# BIBLIOGRAPHY

- <sup>1</sup> "In U.S., Decline of Christianity Continues at Rapid Pace." <https://www.pewforum.org/2019/10/17/in-u-s-decline-of-christianity-continues-at-rapid-pace/>. 17 October 2019. Web. 6 November 2020.
- <sup>2</sup> Putman, Jim, et al. *DiscipleShift*. Zondervan, 2013, p. Multiple.
- <sup>3</sup> Fikes, Bradley J. "3 out of 4 Americans are lonely, UCSD study says." <https://www.sandiegouniontribune.com/business/biotech/sd-me-wisdom-reduces-loneliness-20181218-story.html>. 18 Dec 2018. Web. 6 November 2020.
- <sup>4</sup> Renner, Bob. "Survey: Average American Hasn't Made a Friend—In 5 Years!" <https://www.studyfinds.org/survey-average-american-hasnt-made-new-friend-in-5-years/>. 9 October 2019. Web. 6 November 2020.
- <sup>5</sup> "Living Paycheck to Paycheck is a Way of Life for Majority of U.S. Workers, According to New CareerBuilder Survey." <http://press.careerbuilder.com/2017-08-24-Living-Paycheck-to-Paycheck-is-a-Way-of-Life-for-Majority-of-U-S-Workers-According-to-New-CareerBuilder-Survey>. 2017 Aug 24. Web. 6 November 2020.
- <sup>6</sup> Taylor, Victoria. "Unhappy in America: Nearly 70% of U.S. Employees are miserable at work, study finds." <https://www.nydailynews.com/life-style/majority-u-s-workers-not-engaged-job-gallup-poll-article-1.2094990>. 28 January 2015. Web. 6 November 2020.
- <sup>7</sup> Wikipedia. "Pareto Principle." [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pareto\\_principle](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pareto_principle). Web. 6 November 2020.
- <sup>8</sup> Gantz, Lior. "Why 98% of People Die Without Fulfilling Their Dreams." <https://www.wealthresearchgroup.com/why-98-of-people-die-without-fulfilling-their-dreams/>. 17 July 2016. Web. 6 November 2020.
- <sup>9</sup> McLeod, Saul. "Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs." <https://www.simplypsychology.org/maslow.html#:~:text=Maslow's%20hierarchy%20of%20needs%20is,hierarchical%20levels%20within%20a%20pyramid.&text=From%20the%20bottom%20of%20the,esteem%2C%20and%20self%2Dactualization>. 20 March 2020. Web. 6 November 2020.
- <sup>10</sup> "Quotegeek." <http://quotegeek.com/television-quotes/the-office-u-s/10245/>. Web. 6 November 2020.
- <sup>11</sup> "A New Generation Expresses Its Skepticism and Frustration with Christianity." <https://www.barna.com/research/a-new-generation-expresses-its-skepticism-and-frustration-with-christianity/>. 21 September 2017. Web. 6 November 2020.
- <sup>12</sup> Dizikes, Peter. "Study: On Twitter, false news travels faster than true stories." <https://news.mit.edu/2018/study-twitter-false-news-travels-faster-true-stories-0308>. 8 March 2018. Web. 6 Novmeber 2020.
- <sup>13</sup> "Black Lives Matter and Racial Tension in America." <https://www.barna.com/research/black-lives-matter-and-racial-tension-in-america/>. 5 May 2016. Web. 6 November 2020.
- <sup>14</sup> "White Christians Have Become Even Less Motivated to Address Racial Injustice." <https://www.barna.com/research/american-christians-race-problem/>. 15 September 2020. Web. 6 November 2020.
- <sup>15</sup> "D.L. Moody Quotes." <https://www.316quotes.com/d-l-moody-quotes/>. Web. 6 November 2020.
- <sup>16</sup> Im, Daniel. "Input vs. Output Goals for Discipleship." <https://www.danielim.com/2017/08/15/input-vs-output-goals-discipleship/>. 15 August 2017. Web. 6 November 2020.
- <sup>17</sup> Platt, David. *Radical*. Multnomah, 2012, p. 46.
- <sup>18</sup> Ibid, p. 13.
- <sup>19</sup> Ibid, p. 14.

<sup>20</sup> "Dallas Willard Quotes." <https://www.goodreads.com/quotes/367611-the-greatest-issue-facing-the-world-today-with-all-its#~:text=%E2%80%9CThe%20greatest%20issue%20facing%20the%20world%20today%2C%20with%20all%20its,Kingdom%20of%20the%20Heavens%20into>. Web. 6 November 2020.