



the **Call to Follow**

living the way of Jesus in the world

GOD'S PEOPLE:
Continuing the Journey in Community

SESSION 4

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OVERVIEW

After Jesus rose from the dead, he spent time preparing his disciples for what would happen next. This involved instructions to wait and pray for God's Spirit. When the Holy Spirit came and filled the new believers with fresh and creative strength, the "church" was born. The next stage of our global discipleship journey focuses on God's people in community, beginning with the church described in the New Testament and extending to the church today, including your local congregation.

The formation of the church began with the sending of the Holy Spirit to enable his followers to witness to his death and resurrection, proclaim that 'Jesus is Lord,' and declare that a new world had opened up through him. The story of the Church is essentially the story of Jesus continuing to teach and minister and re-create the world through his Spirit-led people.

Though descriptive of a one-time historical event, the book of Acts also remains a model for every church today – centred on the need for prayer and spiritual strength, marked by clear teaching of a counter-cultural lifestyle that calls people to follow Christ and support one another and those in need, proper organization and inner discipline, and courageous and wise confrontation with evil. The first church sought to link word and action, and integrate truth with love.

The first Christians identified themselves as followers of the "way" and believers who "turned to the Lord." They saw themselves as a "sent" or "called-out" people, responding to the commission of Jesus, crossing boundaries into uncomfortable territory to minister to people in need. The boldest dimension of this new life was proclaiming that Jesus was "Lord," a word that in the first century carried with it the counter-message that the Roman Emperor was not the Lord. What made this risky was that worship of the Emperor was the dominant religion of the day. Saying yes to Jesus meant saying no to powerful beliefs and

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forces that opposed the way of Christ – but in bowing their knees to Christ alone, the early Christians were confident that one day all people would recognize Christ as Lord. The early church grew in the midst of persecution and a world of ethnic and religious tensions.

The Apostle Paul was a towering figure in the early days, creatively integrating and explaining the Christian faith in a world that mixed Greek culture and thought, Roman power and Jewish spirituality. Wisdom and generosity were needed in bridging cultural and religious gaps between Jews and Gentiles. While boldly communicating the reality of new life in Jesus as Lord, the early churches were committed to purity, compassion, justice and generosity in a world of crippling poverty and ethical confusion.

In taking the message of Jesus into the countries of the Ancient Near East, the first apostles provide powerful blueprints for global disciples today. Taken together, the New Testament letters show how the early church began to follow Jesus by engaging in the world – renewing creation through relationships, generosity, justice, and the expression of godly beauty. The risen Lord, through his people and the church, was continually re-entering the world in majesty and mercy to transform human life.

Guided by biblical examples and strengthened by the Spirit, churches throughout history have continually sought to nurture individuals in their faith, and provide evidence of the emerging “Kingdom of God.” As a result, the Church continues to become the single multi-ethnic family promised by the Creator God to Abraham, representing hundreds of countries around the world. Displaying a breathtaking array of cultural influences and human creativity, churches reveal a mosaic of worship styles, which include Canadian Baptists. Like diverse members of a single family, Christians remain united “in Christ.”

Over time, churches and Christians have continually confronted evil and promoted the cause of God’s Kingdom, contributing to progress in areas such as health care and housing, schooling and social services, political reform and community

development. We can all identify famous Christians who made a lasting impact, but the Church is not a superstar culture. The Church is the body of Christ, and every member matters. Wherever Christ is followed, ordinary people gather to demonstrate that heaven and earth are connecting, and God’s new creation continues to emerge. In one of his final prayers, Jesus prayed that his followers would be “one,” even as Jesus and God the Father were united. Though that prayer is not yet fully answered, there are remarkable and beautiful examples of unity of purpose, lived out in words and actions.

Across Canada today, many local churches serve as shining examples of Kingdom living. They celebrate changed lives in individuals who find forgiveness and new life in Christ, and courageously confront the issues of isolation, complacency, fear, and indifference within the church. They are addressing the problems of spiritual and material poverty, inequality and suffering in their communities with creative ministries of hospitality, generosity and public engagement. They provide evidence that global discipleship begins in our local communities and by loving our immediate neighbours.

It is not easy to be a Christian or a faithful congregation in Canada. The absence of aggressive persecution has created a soft environment where Christians are often portrayed by the media as cranky, old-fashioned, or simply irrelevant in a nation founded on values of peace, order and good government. It is always important for the church to ask questions of identity: Who are we as God’s people and what has he called us to say and do in the places we live? How can we share the message of God’s Kingdom both in word and action? How and where can we partner globally? What are the barriers we face and how can we welcome help from others to address local needs? The opportunities to work together are ready to be explored.