

The image features a central teal-colored rectangular area with a visible brushstroke texture. This teal area is framed by olive branches with green leaves and small olives, extending from the corners towards the center. The word "CONNECTED" is written across the teal area in a bold, dark brown, sans-serif font.

**CONNECTED**



# Table of CONTENTS

## **CONNECTED: LIFE WITH GOD ..... 1**

Discipleship & Our Life in Christ .....	1
Discipleship & Our Life on Mission .....	1
How to Use This guide.....	2
A Note on Sources & Resources .....	2

## **MISSION ..... 3**

Passages for Individual or Communal Reflection .....	4
Questions for Reflection & Discussion.....	5
Suggested Practices.....	6
Going Deeper .....	7

## **CONFESSION, REPENTANCE & FORGIVENESS ..... 8**

Passages for Individual or Communal Reflection .....	9
Questions for Reflection & Discussion.....	10
Suggested Practices.....	11
Going Deeper .....	12

## **SIMPLICITY: HONORING GOD WITH POSSESSIONS . 13**

Passages for Individual or Communal Reflection .....	14
Questions for Reflection & Discussion.....	15
Suggested Practices.....	16
Going Deeper .....	17

**COMMUNITY..... 18**

Passages for Individual or Communal Reflection ..... 19

Questions for Reflection & Discussion..... 20

Suggested Practices..... 21

Going Deeper ..... 22

## CONNECTED: LIFE WITH GOD

This is the second of a three-part series exploring different facets and practices of the Christian life. The first part of the series focused on practices that deepen your communion with God. Part two of the series explores practices that help us define our purpose as the church and cultivate a healthy community, thereby laying a foundation for a life of mission. Part three will delve deeper into the relationships and practices that shape our community and form the context for our mission.

### DISCIPLESHIP & OUR LIFE IN CHRIST

At the outset of this study, we ought to be clear about what we mean when we talk about discipleship and our life with God.

Discipleship is the intentional process of our lives being brought into increasing conformity to the life of Jesus. Discipleship involves the transformation of the whole person so that our loves are cultivated, our beliefs are deepened, our thinking is sharpened, and our agendas are "altered." Discipleship is Spirit-empowered formation into the cross-shaped life of Jesus. This life in Jesus begins at our conversion when by God's grace working through faith our sins are forgiven and we are declared righteous on the basis of Christ's merit, and we are reconciled to God through the person and work of Jesus. This initial act of justification in Christ leads way to our sanctification, or our increasing in Christlikeness, which is the focus of discipleship. Sanctification, or the life of discipleship, is only possible because of our life in Christ, and the abiding presence and power of Spirit within us. Growth in godliness occurs through our becoming ever more dependent on God's grace and work within us.

### DISCIPLESHIP & OUR LIFE ON MISSION

Jesus calls us to follow Him and invites us to participate in God's work of redemption. Discipleship is a process of growing in our fulfillment of not just the Great Commandment but also the Great Commission. Midland Bible Church has adopted as its charter Romans 12 with a focus on equipping believers with the grace and knowledge needed to love God and serve others. Our emphasis on being a Romans 12 church is ultimately a strategy which has as its end goals the fulfillment of the Great Commandment and the Great Commission. We are a Romans 12 church because we believe that the Great Commandment and the Great Commission can best be realized through the building up and equipping of the body. The building up and equipping of the body for a life of mission drives the vision and practice of discipleship.

## HOW TO USE THIS GUIDE

This guide is intended for use in small group contexts, but individuals could benefit from reading, practicing, and reflecting on the disciplines surveyed here. Small groups who elect to use this resource might want to consider using the following structure for group gatherings:

- *Opening Discussion*: Discuss how each member in the group defines the discipline or topic being examined that week. Ask if anyone has experience with the practice being discussed that week.
- *Read the key quotes and passages from Scripture*: Examine how this practice is portrayed both in the writing of other believers and within the pages of Scripture.
- *Discuss Questions*: Work through some of the suggested questions for reflection and discussion. Do not treat this list of questions as a task to be slavishly followed. Rather after selecting an initial question or two, allow the conversation to develop naturally. As needed go back to the question bank to provide new stimulation to the conversation.
- *Suggested Practices*: Decide whether there are practices that those in the group want to pursue, either individually or with others. Remember, making a public commitment adds healthy accountability to new practices.
- *Close in Prayer*: Be sure to leave time to take prayer requests and pray for one another.

## A NOTE ON SOURCES & RESOURCES

Throughout this guide, footnotes indicate when an idea or content was derived from an outside source. In addition, each week includes resources for further study so that you or your HomeGroup has ideas of what to read or study next if a particular topic interests you.

## MISSION

“Mission began with God. God has a mission. That’s why he made for himself a people, but his mission came before people. His mission came before the Bible. He gave his mission a Bible. He gave his mission a people. God’s mission, God’s project, is to bless. Open doors are an invitation to be part of the missio Dei.

John Ortberg, *All the Places You’ll Go...How Will You Know?*

“Fundamentally, our mission (if it is biblically informed and validated) means our committed participation as God’s people, at God’s invitation and command, in God’s own mission within the history of God’s world for the redemption of God’s creation.”

Christopher J. H. Wright, *The Mission of God: Unlocking the Bible’s Grand Narrative*

“Yet we are carries of the gospel – the good news that was meant to *change* the world. Belief is not enough. Worship is not enough. Personal morality is not enough. And Christian community is not enough. God has always demanded *more*. When we committed ourselves to following Christ, we also committed to living our lives in such a way that a watching world would catch a glimpse of God’s character – his love, justice, and mercy – through our words, actions and behavior. “We are...Christ’s ambassadors,” wrote the Apostle Paul, “as though God were making his appeal through us” (2 Cor 5:20). God chose us to be his representatives. He called us to go out, to proclaim the good news – to *be* the good news – and to change the world. Living out our faith privately was never meant to be an option.

Richard Stearns, *The Hole in Our Gospel*

## PASSAGES FOR INDIVIDUAL OR COMMUNAL REFLECTION

For I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God that brings salvation to everyone who believes: first to the Jew, then to the Gentile. <sup>17</sup> For in the gospel the righteousness of God is revealed—a righteousness that is by faith from first to last, just as it is written: “The righteous will live by faith.”

*Romans 1:16-17*

So from now on we regard no one from a worldly point of view. Though we once regarded Christ in this way, we do so no longer. <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. We implore you on Christ’s behalf: Be reconciled to God. <sup>21</sup> God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

*2 Corinthians 5:16-20*

The LORD had said to Abram, “Go from your country, your people and your father’s household to the land I will show you.

“I will make you into a great nation,

and I will bless you;

I will make your name great,

and you will be a blessing.

I will bless those who bless you,

and whoever curses you I will curse;

and all peoples on earth

will be blessed through you.”

*Genesis 12:1-3*

## QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION & DISCUSSION

1. "Most of us live our lives with small souls, and we have small problems, and we walk through small doors. And Jesus comes and he has this great big problem 'How do I save the world?'...We all have problems. You can have a big problem or you can have a small problem. A small problem is 'How do I be more successful?' 'How do I get better looking?' 'How do I grow my 401(k)?' A big problem is 'How do I join Jesus in saving the world?'" – John Ortberg.
  - Think about your involvements over the past week or month or year – whatever time frame you wish to evaluate. What percentage of your time and attention would you say was captured by "small-soul" problems, and what percentage was focused on "big-soul" issues?<sup>1</sup>
2. Read Acts 20:32-38. According to verse 32 what two things is the grace of God able to accomplish in our lives?
3. Continuing with Acts 20:32-38 notice the transformation that Paul himself experienced from his life of service.
  - Being free of covetousness.
  - Having his own needs met.
  - The ability to meet the needs of others.
  - An expanding capacity for hard work.
  - The soul anchored belief that it is more blessed to give than to receive.
4. How is it possible that serving others is the conduit to knowing soul-level satisfaction yourself? How does this truth surprise you and excite you?<sup>2</sup>
5. How is your mission and purpose in life as a Christian connected to God's mission? What can you do to invest your time, talent and abilities more fully in God's mission?
6. What prevents us from living missionally as followers of Jesus?
7. How are you living intentionally as a part of God's mission within the relationships and responsibilities of your life right now? Think of marriage, parenting, church involvement, community involvement, relationships with neighbors, work, etc.
8. How can you become better informed and involved in how God is working around the world?

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<sup>1</sup> The quote and question prompt are taken from *When Compassion Meets Action Participant's Guide* (Carol Stream: Tyndale, 2017): 13.

<sup>2</sup> Questions 2-4 are adapted from *When Compassion Meets Action Participant's Guide*, 15-17.

## SUGGESTED PRACTICES

- Buy a copy of *Operation World* and spend time praying for God's work in other countries around the world. Consider taking a week or two as a HomeGroup to pray together for a country, using this resource.
- Look for ways to get involved in serving the community right here in Midland. Check out the "Missions" button in the MBC app or on the website to learn about affinity ministries that you or your HomeGroup could serve alongside.
- Consider getting involved at MBC through serving in any number of volunteer positions. For more information about where to serve talk to your HomeGroup leader or contact the church.

## GOING DEEPER

- HomeGroups may want to consider the study *When Compassion Meets Action*. For more information contact Midland Bible Church.
- John Ortberg's *All the Places to Go...How Will You Know?* offers an engaging and insightful look at becoming the kind of person who courageously steps through the doors God has opened. This book can be read on its own or as a part of the *When Compassion Meets Action* small group study.
- Richard Stearn's book *The Hole in Our Gospel* challenges Christians to put their faith into action within the public sphere for the good of the gospel and the good of others. Stearns, president emeritus of World Vision USA, has spent much of his adult life working to help the church address issues of global poverty in the name of Jesus Christ.
- For a more biblical and theological study, Christopher J. H. Wright's book *The Mission of God: Unlocking the Bible's Grand Narrative* has become a standard text within both missions and hermeneutics. Wright explores how God's mission drives the narrative of Scripture so that the *missio Dei* provides the lens for our interpretation of Scripture and gives us the foundational purpose of our Christian life.

## CONFESSION, REPENTANCE & FORGIVENESS

If we know that the people of God are first a fellowship of sinners, we are freed to hear the unconditional call of God's love and to confess our needs openly before our brothers and sisters. We know we are not alone in our sin. The fear and pride that cling to us like barnacles cling to others also. We are sinners together. In acts of mutual confession we release the power that heals. Our humanity is no longer denied, but transformed.

Richard Foster, *Celebration of Discipline*

A man who confesses his sins in the presence of a brother knows that he is no longer alone with himself; he experiences the presence of God in the reality of the other person. As long as I am by myself in the confession of my sins everything remains in the dark, but in the presence of a brother the sin has to be brought into the light."

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*

The key qualifications [of a confessor] are spiritual maturity, wisdom, compassion, good common sense, the ability to keep a confidence, and a wholesome sense of humor.

Richard Foster, *Celebration of Discipline*

When our Lord and Master, Jesus Christ, said "Repent", He called for the entire life of believers to be one of penitence.

Martin Luther, "The Ninety-Five Theses"

## PASSAGES FOR INDIVIDUAL OR COMMUNAL REFLECTION

This is the message we have heard from him and declare to you: God is light; in him there is no darkness at all. If we claim to have fellowship with him and yet walk in the darkness, we lie and do not live out the truth. But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus, his Son, purifies us from all sin.

If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness. If we claim we have not sinned, we make him out to be a liar and his word is not in us.

My dear children, I write this to you so that you will not sin. But if anybody does sin, we have an advocate with the Father—Jesus Christ, the Righteous One. He is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not only for ours but also for the sins of the whole world.

*1 John 1:5-2:2*

Therefore confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous person is powerful and effective.

*James 5:16*

Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you. Follow God's example, therefore, as dearly loved children and walk in the way of love, just as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.

*Ephesians 4:32-5:2*

## QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION & DISCUSSION

1. How does confession and forgiveness relate to restitution or justice, and reconciliation?
2. What is the role of self-examination within practicing a lifestyle of confession and forgiveness?
3. What prevents us from practicing self-examination well?
4. Share a time when following confession someone extended forgiveness towards you.
5. Share a time when you extended forgiveness to someone else.
6. What characteristics make for a good confessor? How can you practice transparency and authenticity while recognizing that not everyone needs to know everything about you?
7. How do you know when to go to someone with a hurt or wrong that has been done to you?
8. Does the person who wronged you need to admit their wrong for you to forgive them? Why or why not?
9. How is forgiveness sometimes a process? What does that process of forgiving look like?
10. Why is forgiveness a significant part of the Christian life?

## SUGGESTED PRACTICES

- Find someone with whom you can practice confession. Consider some of the following in practicing this discipline:
  - Identify a confessor: See the quote above for some of the characteristics of a good confessor.
  - Be straightforward and sincere in making your confession.
  - Avoid blame-shifting or justification in confession.
  - Choose the right time to have this deeply personal and healing conversation.
- Consider how you might respond when someone confesses something to you.
  - As you hear the confession, remind yourself that you live under the cross as a recipient of God's grace.
  - Pray as you are hearing the confession. Pray for discernment and for grace.
  - Listen and be quiet.
  - Point back towards Scripture and the cross, perhaps reading or reciting Scripture without explanation or exposition.
  - Pray for and with the individual.
  - Point the individual towards making things right with anyone they have wronged if possible.
- Mediate on the forgiveness you have received, and the model of forgiveness given to us by Jesus himself. Pray that God would give you a heart of compassion and grace to extend forgiveness.
- Reflect on the wrongs that you have done to others. Is there someone in your life to whom you need to apologize and seek forgiveness?
- Reflect on the wrongs done to you. Is there someone against whom you are harboring bitterness? How can you begin the process of extending forgiveness? Is it possible or advisable to approach that person and tell them of the hurt they have done to you? In some situations this may not be advisable, so seek counsel from a Christian whom you respect if you are struggling with how to move forward in extending forgiveness.

## GOING DEEPER

- Richard Foster's book *Celebration of Discipline* provides practical steps for engaging this practice in his chapter on confession.
- HomeGroups may want to consider reading *Life Together*, Bonhoeffer's classic exploration of Christian community. This short book includes powerful discussions of the role of confession and forgiveness within a Christian community.
- Miroslav Volf's book *Free of Charge: Giving and Forgiving in a Culture Stripped of Grace* provides a pastoral and theological examination of forgiveness within the Christian life.

## SIMPLICITY: HONORING GOD WITH POSSESSIONS

“[Materialism is] the modern psychosis that defines people by how much they can produce or what they earn...This psychosis permeates even our mythology. The modern hero is the poor boy who purposefully becomes rich rather than the rich boy who voluntarily becomes poor...Covetousness we call ambition. Hoarding we call prudence. Greed we call industry.”

Richard Foster, *Celebration of Discipline*

We need a brand-new way of thinking about money, a way that is rooted in the gospel story and its narrative of the lavish grace of God, most powerfully pictured in the amazing gift of the Lord Jesus. Through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus, God frees us from our bondage to ourselves (in terms of money, that means always starting with our interests and concerns) and he frees us to find our identity, meaning, and purpose in him. He calls us to embed our personal money stories in the larger generosity story of Scripture. This means resting in the fact that he has committed to provide everything we need (not want) and accepting that he calls us to be part of his mission of grace. So we view our money not primarily through the lens of personal provision, but through the lens of God’s generosity mission on earth.

Paul David Tripp, *Redeeming Money*

## PASSAGES FOR INDIVIDUAL OR COMMUNAL REFLECTION

Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moths and vermin destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where moths and vermin do not destroy, and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.

The eye is the lamp of the body. If your eyes are healthy, your whole body will be full of light. But if your eyes are unhealthy, your whole body will be full of darkness. If then the light within you is darkness, how great is that darkness!

No one can serve two masters. Either you will hate the one and love the other, or you will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and money.

*Matthew 6:19-24*

I know what it is to be in need, and I know what it is to have plenty. I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want. I can do all things through him who gives me strength.

*Philippians 4:12-13*

Keep your lives free from the love of money and be content with what you have, because God has said, "Never will I leave you, never will I forsake you." So we say with confidence, "The Lord is my helper; I will not be afraid. What can mere mortals do to me."

*Hebrews 13:5-6*

## QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION & DISCUSSION

1. How might a biblical understanding of simplicity affect the way you live? Be practical and be specific.
2. What actions would you engage in, or disengage from as a result of living simply?
3. What attitudes towards wealth and possessions do you see in the culture around you?
4. What is your attitude towards your/your family's wealth and material possessions?
5. Would you consider your attitude honoring to God? Why or why not?
6. How does the example of Jesus with regard to possessions challenge you?
7. How does Jesus' example of living and dying for the good of others provide you with a model for how-to relate to your wealth?

## SUGGESTED PRACTICES

- Practices focused on pursuing simplicity:<sup>3</sup>
  - Buy things for usefulness not status.
  - Reject anything that is addictive for you.
  - Give things away.
  - Resist the need to immediately buy the latest and greatest gadget.
  - Enjoy without owning.
  - Learn to appreciate creation.
  - Use caution before incurring debt.
  - Practice simplicity of speech.
  - Reject things that contribute to the oppression of others.
  - Get rid of anything that keeps you from seeking the kingdom of God.
- Practices focused on cultivating generosity:
  - If you have never done so begin giving consistently and regularly to your local church.
  - Consider how you could create a budget line item providing you with some margin to give to crisis situations locally and around the world.
  - Deliberately find a missions agency or local community agency that seeks to address poverty or related issues of malnutrition, limited access to health care, mental and emotional well-being, or even human trafficking. Check out the “Missions” page on [midlandbible.org](http://midlandbible.org) for a list of affinity ministries that you could consider supporting.
- Practices focused on resisting the allure of wealth
  - Practice hospitality by having people into your home on a regular basis.
  - Study the passages of Scripture that address wealth and possessions.

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<sup>3</sup> These suggestions are taken from Richard Foster’s *Celebration of Discipline*.

## GOING DEEPER

- Randy Alcorn's book, *The Treasure Principle* has a companion series on RightNow Media for HomeGroups or individuals to study. For a more comprehensive examination of money and stewardship *Money, Possessions and Eternity* also by Randy Alcorn includes a study guide.
- *Redeeming Money: How God Reveals and Reorients Our Hearts* by Paul David Tripp is a readable and practical look at money and its place in our lives. The book includes chapter reviews and reflection questions making it a valuable HomeGroup resource.
- Those interested in detailed biblical and theological treatments should consider Crag Blomberg's book *Neither Poverty nor Riches: A Biblical Theology of Possessions*, Luke Timothy Johnson's *Sharing Possessions*, or Bruce Longenecker's *Remember the Poor: Paul, Poverty & the Greco-Roman World*. All these works combine examination of Scripture, theological reflection, and practical principles for application to contemporary life.

## COMMUNITY

God does not invite us to church because it's a comfortable place to find a bit of spiritual encouragement. No, he invites us into a spiritual family of misfits and outcasts. He welcomes us into a home that's rarely what we want yet just what we need."

Collin Hansen & Jonathan Leeman, *Rediscover Church*

Paul knew that the church is more than it often seems: it is the people of God, the dwelling place of the Spirit, and the fullness of Christ. The truth about the church shaped Paul's experience of the church. The truth should shape us, too, so that belonging to this ordinary gathering of unremarkable people becomes one of the highest joys and greatest privileges of our lives. In the unassuming assembly of our local churches, Christ manifests his glory."

Megan Hill, *A Place to Belong*

## PASSAGES FOR INDIVIDUAL OR COMMUNAL REFLECTION

They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. Everyone was filled with awe at the many wonders and signs performed by the apostles. All the believers were together and had everything in common. They sold property and possessions to give to anyone who had need.

*Acts 2:42-45*

So from now on we regard no one from a worldly point of view. Though we once regarded Christ in this way, we do so no longer. Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come. The old has gone, the new is here! All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation: 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. We are therefore Christ's ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us. We implore you on Christ's behalf: Be reconciled to God. God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

*2 Corinthians 5:16-21*

But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's special possession, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light. Once you were not a people, but now you are the people of God; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy.

Dear friends, I urge you, as foreigners and exiles, to abstain from sinful desires, which wage war against your soul. Live such good lives among the pagans that, though they accuse you of doing wrong, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day he visits us."

*1 Peter 2:9-12*

## QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION & DISCUSSION

1. How can our individualism hinder our ability to invest in and be a part of meaningful community?
2. If your self-centeredness were turned into a joyful God-centeredness, what would be the results for yourself and for the community around you?
3. How can involvement in community become a consumeristic activity? What happens to a community when members participate primarily as consumers? Are there ways you need to guard against this?
4. Serving community and serving alongside community are key aspects of Christian community. How can serving with your community become a bigger part of your life at Midland Bible Church?
5. How does the depth of honesty you practice in community allow your community to love and serve one another? Are there ways your HomeGroup needs to grow in transparency and honesty so that it can grow in love and service to one another?
6. Have you ever been in a community where you felt accepted (not perfectly, of course, but genuinely) What made you feel that way?
7. On a scale from 1-10 (1 being low, 10 being high), how grace filled would you say our community is? Why did you choose the number you did? What can we do to become a more grace filled community? Think here both of your HomeGroup community as well as the broader community of Midland Bible Church.
8. What would it look like for you personally and your community corporately to live out our identity and calling as missionaries or “ambassadors”? How does this concept of living as an ambassador challenge or encourage you?

## SUGGESTED PRACTICES

- Consider how the Lord is inviting you into a more significant engagement with community. Do you need to make a commitment to participating in weekly worship services or HomeGroup gatherings?
- Evaluate your community involvement using the lens of Scripture, prayer, accountability, celebration, and service. Which of these do you or your community practice well together. In which area do you or your community need to grow?
- Consider whether there is someone you know whom you need to invite into your HomeGroup.
- Consider whether God may be calling you and another couple or friend to start a new HomeGroup thereby extending hospitality and community towards others.

## GOING DEEPER

- HomeGroup's should consider going through *The Gospel-Centered Community* together. This nine-session study provides groups with an opportunity to grow together in community and could be a valuable way to establish or reset HomeGroup culture. Contact Midland Bible Church for more information on this study.
- *True Community* by Jerry Bridges would make a great study for HomeGroups or provide HomeGroup leaders with some fresh ways of understanding the value and practice of Christian community.
- *Rediscover Church* by Collin Hansen & Jonathan Leeman could be read individually or used by a HomeGroup to explore what it means to belong to a local church and why the church is essential. Extra copies of the book are available for HomeGroups that are interested in this resource.
- Megan Hill's book *A Place to Belong* challenges readers to grow in their love for their church and includes study questions that could be used for individual reflection or small group discussion.
- Dietrich Bonhoeffer's classic *Life Together* could valuably be read by individuals or groups.
- Individuals desiring to understand more fully the church and its mission should consider *Being the Body* by Charles Colson and Ellen Vaughn. John Stott's *The Living Church* captures many of Stott's convictions regarding the church after decades of pastoral ministry. Finally, Francis Chan's *Letters to the Church* calls for a renewal of the church's life, mission, and practice.