

# The Shape of Our Lives

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

<b>Introduction to the “Getting Your Feet Wet” Series. . . . .</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>Conversation #1: Formation Happens! . . . . .</b>	<b>11</b>
Questions for Personal Reflection and Group Discussion	19
Paying Greater Attention	20
<b>Conversation #2: Desires . . . . .</b>	<b>21</b>
Scripture for Further Study	26
Questions for Personal Reflection and Group Discussion	27
Paying Greater Attention	29
<b>Conversation #3: Convictions . . . . .</b>	<b>30</b>
Questions for Personal Reflection and Group Discussion	39
Paying Greater Attention	40
<b>Conversation #4: Character. . . . .</b>	<b>42</b>
Scripture for Further Study	49
Questions for Personal Reflection and Group Discussion	50
Paying Greater Attention	51
<b>Conversation #5: Stories . . . . .</b>	<b>52</b>
Scripture for Further Study	61
Questions for Personal Reflection and Group Discussion	62
Paying Greater Attention	63
<b>Conversation #6: Practices . . . . .</b>	<b>64</b>
Questions for Personal Reflection and Group Discussion	73
Paying Greater Attention	74
<b>Conversation #7: Institutions . . . . .</b>	<b>75</b>
Questions for Personal Reflection and Group Discussion	83
Paying Greater Attention	85

# The Shape of God’s Reign

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

<b>Introduction to “Getting Your Feet Wet” Series. . . . .</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>Conversation #1: What’s the Point?. . . . .</b>	<b>11</b>
Questions for Personal Reflection and Group Discussion	18
Paying Greater Attention	18
<b>Conversation #2: Image is Everything . . . . .</b>	<b>19</b>
Questions for Personal Reflection and Group Discussion	28
Paying Greater Attention	28
<b>Conversation #3: Kingdoms, Reigns and Other Social Orders . . . . .</b>	<b>29</b>
Scripture for Further Study	39
Questions for Personal Reflection and Group Discussion	40
Paying Greater Attention	40
<b>Conversation #4: The Shape of God’s Reign: Wholeness. . . . .</b>	<b>41</b>
Scripture for Further Study	51
Questions for Personal Reflection and Group Discussion	52
Paying Greater Attention	52
<b>Conversation #5: The Shape of God’s Reign: Truthfulness. . . . .</b>	<b>53</b>
Scripture for Further Study	62
Questions for Personal Reflection and Group Discussion	63
Paying Greater Attention	64
<b>Conversation #6: The Shape of God’s Reign: Forgiveness . . . . .</b>	<b>66</b>
Scripture for Further Study	76
Questions for Personal Reflection and Group Discussion	77
Paying Greater Attention	77
<b>Conversation #7: The Shape of God’s Reign: Reconciliation. . . . .</b>	<b>78</b>
Scripture for Further Study	87
Questions for Personal Reflection and Group Discussion	88
Paying Greater Attention	88
Conclusion	89

## Introduction to the “Getting Your Feet Wet” Series

### What’s this all about?

The first two studies in the “Getting Your Feet Wet” series are designed to foster important conversations within the life of congregations and parishes. They begin with the assumption that the church in our day needs to think carefully and discuss openly what it means to be the church. Just as it’s difficult to imagine that a business, school or athletic team could accomplish its purpose if participants had very different and possibly competing understandings of what that purpose was, so it is with the church. If the church gathers each week with vastly different and competing understandings of what it means to be the church, it’s hard to imagine that things will go well.

These first two studies, therefore, focus on two important issues. The first study, “The Shape of Our Lives,” explores the many ways in which formation is always happening whether we are aware of it or not. This study’s guiding assumption is twofold: first, that the church is called to be a community of formation; and second, that this calling is always lived out in particular social contexts where other kinds of formation are also taking place. Are we aware of how our lives are being shaped simply by living everyday life in the ways we are encouraged to do? Are we aware of the ways that the cultural formation we undergo may be at odds with our call to be formed into the image of Christ? It’s one thing, of course, to *acknowledge* that we are always being shaped and formed by the world around us; it’s quite another to consider deeply how this may be taking place in very particular ways in our daily lives.

Once we are clearer about the particular ways in which formation happens, we are in a better position to discuss the matters raised in the second study, “The Shape of God’s Reign.” In this second study, the central questions are these: What do we think the purpose of the church is and where did our notions about this come from? Is it possible that our host culture has shaped us to think about the church in ways that are unhelpful if not unfaithful? What is God doing in the world and how have we as the church been called to participate with God in that work? These are weighty matters indeed, but we take them up not primarily as matters of intellectual curiosity, but as a means of discerning where God is at work in our lives and where further growth and maturity might be required.

## A different kind of study

Both of these studies are designed to encourage congregations to develop or strengthen habits of attending carefully to their life together. As you are probably aware, you can tell a great deal about a congregation by examining its conversational habits. When people in a congregation get together, *what* do they talk about? Are they able to talk about things that really matter (and are therefore potentially “dangerous”), or is all or most of their conversation about safe things such as the weather and sports? And if a congregation *has* developed the habit of talking about important but difficult matters, *how* are these conversations carried out? Is there anything about the way Christians engage in difficult conversations that is rooted in our vision of the church, or do we go about these conversations largely as the surrounding culture does?

Because many congregations need to learn how to engage in serious conversation, these studies are designed more as an aid to important and potentially defining conversations than they are as a delivery system for particular content. Or put differently, the primary focus of these studies is not the words on the page, but your life together as a congregation. Your congregational life, if you will, is the “text” under consideration. For this reason when you come to the end of these studies, the ways you have learned to be in conversation together will be more important than the study materials themselves. In at least one important respect, then, these studies will never be “over,” because once you develop the habit of taking seriously the shape of your life together, you can never stop doing so.

It may be helpful to think of the following pages as a kind of scaffolding . Of course scaffolding is only a tool—and a rather mundane tool at that—but it can at times be indispensable. If you’ve ever needed stable footing for accessing hard-to-reach areas, either to examine a structure or to engage in needed repairs, you know how important scaffolding can be. But even in those instances, the scaffolding isn’t the focus of the construction project; it’s simply a tool to aid in the necessary work. We would grow concerned if the construction workers gathered every week just to discuss their opinions about the scaffolding. In the same way, you may need to remind yourselves periodically that these pages aren’t the focus of your study; they are offered only as an aid to help you discern some important things about your life together. Of course, important congregational work can be done (and should be done) without the aid of this scaffolding. Indeed, there’s certainly no reason to

think that every congregation will either need this tool or use it in the same way. Whether and how it will be used will depend on the kind of work the Spirit is already doing in your congregation.

For this reason, the pages that follow are meant to assist in shared exploration, not to set a one-size-fits-all agenda. No one expects that when you complete these studies you will have all the answers; rather, the hope is that you will have discovered together the importance of several defining questions around which you may orient your continuing journey to be a faithful community of disciples of Jesus Christ.

### **Some working assumptions**

All of us have working assumptions that guide nearly everything we do. Sometimes we're quite conscious of these assumptions, though often we're not. You may find it helpful to know upfront some of the key working assumptions behind this series. Although there's no expectation that you will necessarily share all of these assumptions, the hope is that by the time the studies are completed you will at least see why some of these assumptions might matter.

Here are a few important ones:

- ◆ The Christian faith is not simply a set of beliefs or doctrines that one assents to with one's mind, but an entire way of life animated by the Spirit of Jesus Christ.
- ◆ The church is a community of disciples called together to bear embodied witness to Jesus Christ, not least by being formed more and more into the image of Christ.
- ◆ Christian formation is always enabled and empowered by the Holy Spirit, yet it typically takes place through rather mundane human processes and activities.
- ◆ None of us has arrived; we are all pilgrims on the path of discipleship to Jesus Christ.
- ◆ Despite very real challenges and obstacles, the church in our day has good reasons to believe that God's Spirit is alive and working in and through our congregations.

## Worries about “formation” language

In our day, no discussion of “formation” can take place very long before some people get at least a little nervous. Is someone going to dictate what the shape of our lives is to be? Is someone going to suggest that faithfulness to Christ has to look one particular way? Isn’t there a real danger when people presume to form others?

In broaching this topic, we do well to avoid two extremes. At one extreme is what we might call the “cookie-cutter” approach. This approach to formation insists that it’s relatively easy to spot the “real Christians” because they’re the ones engaging in the behaviors that “real Christians” engage in and avoiding the behaviors that “real Christians” are supposed to avoid. With this approach, formation primarily involves making sure everyone understands which behaviors are the ones to be embraced and which ones avoided. In some circles, for example, real Christians are those who go to church every Sunday and who don’t go to R-rated movies.

At the other extreme is what we might call the “hands-off” approach. This approach insists that very little, if anything, can or should be said definitively about the shape of Christian life. With this approach, any attempt to form people intentionally is regarded as an unwarranted imposition on people’s freedom to be their own person.

To its credit, the cookie-cutter approach rightly senses that we ought to be able to say *something* about how our lives should be affected by the good news of Jesus Christ. Is there really *no* reference point at all, no way to discern whether a particular person or community of persons is becoming more or less conformed to the image of Christ?

To *its* credit, the hands-off approach is nervous about the ways in which this reference point has been named in the past. Some churches have too often given the impression that “real” Christians are simply those who avoid certain kinds of behaviors. And too often these lists of taboo behaviors have little connection to the good news of Jesus Christ. (The release of the film “The Passion of the Christ” led some churches, for example, to re-examine their blanket prohibition against R-rated movies and to admit that a more nuanced form of discernment might be needed in the church about such matters.)

Although on the surface these two extremes appear to be polar opposites, on a deeper level they are remarkably similar in at least one important respect: they both largely presume that what it means to be a Christian is primarily an *individual* affair. In the cookie-cutter approach, the individual is told what behaviors he or she needs to engage in (and avoid) in order to be considered a faithful Christian. In the hands-off approach, individuals are largely left to their own devices to figure this out, since no one else would presume to tell them what their lives should look like.

This study begins with a different assumption: that what it means to be a Christian is first of all a communal affair. Indeed, one the primary purposes of this series of studies is to encourage congregations to develop more robust practices of communal discernment--to continually seek to understand how best to live out our shared calling to be a community of disciples in a particular time and place.

### **A couple of words about format**

Because these studies are exploratory in character, they make extensive use of questions throughout. Please resist the temptation to think of the questions as supplementary. In fact, the relatively brief material that opens each session is offered primarily in order to aid what we hope is good discussion. This also means that you shouldn't panic if you don't completely understand something that you read in preparation for a given week's discussion; chances are that your understanding will be greatly enhanced after you've had an opportunity to discuss it together with others. Similarly, try not to be frustrated by the fact that more questions are provided than most groups will need; rather, simply focus on those questions (either a few of the ones provided or those arising out of your own group) that you think most important for exploring your life together.

You are encouraged to write down in the spaces provided your reflections about these and other questions that arise during your study. This study is intentionally printed with lots of extra space for recording your own questions and for jotting down responses from others that come up in conversation.

Each session ends with a "paying greater attention" section that encourages you to continue to reflect on these matters in the course of your everyday life. You need not, of course, limit yourself

to these suggestions; you're encouraged to think of more and better suggestions. The important point is to find specific ways and develop the regular habit of reflecting more intentionally upon the shape of your life and the formative influences upon it.

## **Hopes and expectations**

Each group that takes up this study will no doubt have its own hopes and expectations as it begins these conversations. In fact, it would be wise to articulate as many of these as possible as you begin your study in order to get a sense of what people hope will result from your time together. As a way of getting started with that conversation, here are a few things that those of us who wrote this guide hope will happen as a result of your time and commitment:

- ◆ That you will deepen your desire and your abilities to reflect on the shape of your own life and life of your congregation.
- ◆ That you will deepen your desire and your abilities to discuss with other people matters that matter.
- ◆ That as a congregation you will develop a shared vocabulary as a tool to reflect upon and discuss together your common life.
- ◆ And finally, that your conversations together would be used by God in some small way to deepen your shared practice of living out the gospel of Jesus Christ in your corner of God's world.

## **Final words of wisdom**

Congregations who have used these studies in the past have offered several words of wisdom for those taking up the challenge in their own contexts. Here is some of what they have offered:

- ◆ Be patient with all those involved in the study (including yourself!) and with the seemingly slow pace of congregational formation generally. Just as "Rome wasn't built in a day,"



neither are faithful congregations. The habits of thought and action that pose significant obstacles to faithful discipleship are firmly rooted in all of us as a result of years of formation. Examining these habits to discern how they are helping or hurting our life together as the church will require both time and a willingness to be uncomfortable. None of this will be easy, and there are no quick fixes or short cuts.

- ◆ Similarly, don't minimize what the Spirit may be *already* doing in your group as you gather to give careful consideration to your life together. Just because you don't see any tangible results right away doesn't mean that the Spirit isn't working in your common life. Each time you gather devote some time to celebrating the places where you do see the Spirit working in your life together and continue to trust that God will bring to completion the good work begun in you.

Finally, these studies are most beneficial when they are part of a larger practice of sharing life together. Many groups make these studies a part of a regular gathering where participants share a meal and their lives with each other. Much of the long term benefit from these studies comes from intentionally connecting with people in your congregation on a deeper level.