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USA \$24.95 / CAN \$26.95
ISBN 13 978-0-05-080716-2



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SIMPLY CHRISTIAN



Why Christianity Makes Sense

N. T. WRIGHT



Believing and Belonging

The river and the tree appear to be opposites.

The river begins, quite literally, all over the place. A tiny spring way up in the hills; a distant lake, itself fed by streams; a melting glacier—all of them and a thousand more contribute to the babble and rush of water, the smooth flow here and the swirling rapids there. Gradually other streams, other whole rivers, make their contribution. Out of many there emerges the one. I lived for a time by the banks of the Ottawa River in Canada, just upstream from where it joins the St. Lawrence. It is, at that point, over a mile wide. Many streams have made it what it is.

The tree begins with a single seed. An acorn or its equivalent falls into the earth: tiny, vulnerable, alone. It germinates and puts out roots down into the dark earth. Simultaneously it sends up a shoot into the light and air. The roots quickly diverge and probe all over the place, looking for nourishment and water. The shoot becomes a trunk, again a single upright stalk, but this, too, quickly diverges. An oak or a cedar will spread far and wide in all directions. Even the tall, narrow poplar is far more than just a single trunk. The river flows from many into one; the tree grows from one into many.

We need both images if we are to understand the church.

The church is like a river. In the last book of the Bible, John the visionary sees a huge throng of people from every nation, kindred, tribe, and tongue coming together in a great chorus of praise.

Like the river, they all started in different places, but they have now brought their different streams into a single flow. The image of the river reminds us forcibly that, though the church consists by definition of people from the widest possible variety of backgrounds, part of the point of it all is that they belong to one another, and are meant to be part of the same powerful flow, going now in the same single direction. Diversity gives way to unity.

But at the same time the church is like a tree. The single seed, Jesus himself, has been sown in the dark earth and has produced an amazing plant. Branches have set off in all directions, some pointing almost directly upward, some reaching down to the earth, some heading out over neighboring walls. Looking at the eager, outstretched branches, you'd hardly know they were all from the same stem. But they are. Unity generates diversity.

These images shouldn't be pressed too far. In the final chapter of the Bible, where river and trees come together as part of the extraordinary picture of the New Jerusalem, the river comes from a single source, and the trees all bear leaves with the same healing power. But this double image nonetheless helps us understand something of what Christians mean by the church—the people of God, the Body of Christ, the Bride of Christ, God's household, the motley collection of people who gather periodically in the shabby building up the road. What is the church? Who belongs to it, and how? Equally to the point, what is the church *for*?

The Church and Its Purpose

The church is the single, multiethnic family promised by the creator God to Abraham. It was brought into being through Israel's Messiah, Jesus; it was energized by God's Spirit; and it was called to bring the transformative news of God's rescuing justice to the whole creation. That's a tightly packed definition, and every bit of it matters. Let's look at it more closely and see how both the river and the tree contribute to our understanding.

First, the church is the single great river formed from tens of thousands of scattered tributaries. Even when, in the days of the early Israelites, it was mostly a single family, there was plenty of room for outsiders (such as Ruth, in the book that bears her name) to come in to the one family of Israel. Once Jesus had done what he did, that became the new norm: people of every race, every geographical and cultural background, every shape, sort, and size were summoned and welcomed into this renewed people. Calling the church "the people of God" picks up this idea of the continuity, stressed throughout earliest Christianity, between the family of Abraham and the worldwide family of the church. Perhaps the main problem with this image, taken by itself, is that it leaves us (as it left the early Christians) with the puzzle of why so many Jews, right from the start, didn't believe that Jesus was their Messiah and so didn't come to belong to the family that hailed him as Lord.

Second, the church is the many-branched tree planted by God when he called Abraham: the tree whose single trunk is Jesus, and whose many branches, twigs, leaves, and so on are the millions of Christian communities and Christian individuals around the world. One central biblical way of saying much the same thing is to follow Paul and think of the church as the "Body of Christ," the single body in which every individual, and every local community, is a limb or an organ. "The body" is more than merely an image of unity-in-diversity; it's a way of saying that the church is called to *do* the work of Christ, to be the means of his *action* in and for the world. The tree, rooted in ancient Israel, standing up straight in Jesus, branching out with his life in all directions, is to be the means of implementing his work, of making his achievement real in all the world. Looking at the church this way is very close to another biblical image, one which we find both in the Old Testament and in Jesus's own teaching: God's people as the vine, a single plant with many branches.

In both of these images the idea of "family" is never far away, but it can be misleading. At one level it's central; the early Christians

did their best to live as an extended family, caring for each other in the way in which (in that world) extended families did. They called each other “brother” and “sister” and really meant it. They lived and prayed and thought like that: children of the same father, following the same older brother, sharing goods and resources where need arose. When they talked about “love,” that’s the main thing they meant: living as a single family, a mutually supporting community. The church must never forget that calling.

But at the same time the idea of “family” can take us in the wrong direction. As many preachers have said (I’ve heard it attributed to Billy Graham, among others), God has no grandchildren. One of the biggest battles in the early church was all about whether people coming in from the outside, into what was still basically a Jewish community, had to become Jews—that is, had to go through the process of becoming a “proselyte”—in order to belong to the people of God as redefined around Jesus. (This would have meant that they had to practice the Jewish Law, including having their menfolk circumcised.) The answer, from Paul and the rest, was a resounding no. God welcomes non-Jews as non-Jews, and doesn’t require them to become Jewish. At the same time, Jews themselves couldn’t rely on their birth and ancestral status to assure themselves that they were automatically members in the renewed family which God was creating through the Messiah. As John the Baptist had said, the ax is laid to the roots of the tree.

Nor does a person belong to the Messiah and his people simply because of being born into a Christian family or household. That’s not to deny that families have played a significant part in the development of the church. Many of the earliest Christians were related to one another. Sometimes two or three families have contributed massively to the life and work of the church in particular areas and generations. But, as we all know, it’s perfectly possible for someone to grow up in a Christian household and turn his or her back on its faith and life; and it’s not only possible but gloriously and frequently real that people who grew up having no contact

with the gospel or the church come into full and active membership. Many branches fall off the tree; many streams come together into the single river. Being born into a particular human family doesn’t determine whether or not you will become a member of the family of God.

Many people today find it difficult to grasp this sense of corporate Christian identity. We have been so soaked in the individualism of modern Western culture that we feel threatened by the idea of our primary identity being that of the family we belong to—especially when the family in question is so large, stretching across space and time. The church isn’t simply a collection of isolated individuals, all following their own pathways of spiritual growth without much reference to one another. It may sometimes look like that, and even feel like that. And it’s gloriously true that each of us is called to respond to God’s call at a personal level. You can hide in the shadows at the back of the church for a while, but sooner or later you have to decide whether this is for you or not. But we need to learn again the lesson (to take St. Paul’s image of the Body of Christ) that a hand is no less a hand for being part of a larger whole, an entire body. The foot is not diminished in its freedom to be a foot by being part of a body which also contains eyes and ears. In fact, hands and feet are most free to be themselves when they coordinate properly with eyes, ears, and everything else. Cutting them off in an effort to make them truly free, truly themselves, would be truly disastrous.

In particular, it would deny the very purpose for which the church was called into being. According to the early Christians, the church doesn’t exist in order to provide a place where people can pursue their private spiritual agendas and develop their own spiritual potential. Nor does it exist in order to provide a safe haven in which people can hide from the wicked world and ensure that they themselves arrive safely at an otherworldly destination. Private spiritual growth and ultimate salvation come rather as the by-products of the main, central, overarching purpose for which God

has called and is calling us. This purpose is clearly stated in various places in the New Testament: that through the church God will announce to the wider world that he is indeed its wise, loving, and just creator; that through Jesus he has defeated the powers that corrupt and enslave it; and that by his Spirit he is at work to heal and renew it.

The church exists, in other words, for what we sometimes call "mission": to announce to the world that Jesus is its Lord. This is the "good news," and when it's announced it transforms people and societies. Mission, in its widest as well as its more focused senses, is what the church is there for. God intends to put the world to rights; he has dramatically launched this project through Jesus. Those who belong to Jesus are called, here and now, in the power of the Spirit, to be agents of that putting-to-rights purpose. The word "mission" comes from the Latin for "send": "As the father sent me," said Jesus after his resurrection, "so I am sending you" (John 20:21).

We shall consider presently what that means in practice. But first, notice this. From the very beginning, in Jesus's own teaching, it has been clear that people who are called to be agents of God's healing love, putting the world to rights, are called also to be people whose own lives are put to rights by the same healing love. The messengers must model the message. That's why, though the reason for God's call of the church is mission, the missionaries—that is, all Christians—are themselves defined as people who have themselves been made whole. We must now pause and ask what exactly that means.

Waking Up to the Good News

What happens when you wake up in the morning?

For some people, waking up is a rude and shocking experience. Off goes the alarm, and they jump in fright, dragged out of a deep sleep to face the cold, cruel light of day.

For others, it's a quiet, slow process. They can be half-asleep and half-awake, not even sure which is which, until gradually, eventually, without any shock or resentment, they are happy to know that another day has begun.

Most of us know something of both, and a lot in between.

Waking up offers one of the most basic pictures of what can happen when God takes a hand in someone's life.

There are classic alarm-clock stories. Saul of Tarsus on the road to Damascus, blinded by a sudden light, stunned and speechless, discovered that the God he had worshipped had revealed himself in the crucified and risen Jesus of Nazareth. John Wesley found his heart becoming strangely warm, and he never looked back. They and a few others are the famous ones, but there are millions more.

And there are many stories, though they don't hit the headlines in the same way, of the half-awake and half-asleep variety. Some people take months, years, maybe even decades, during which they aren't sure whether they're on the outside of Christian faith looking in, or on the inside looking around to see if it's real.

As with ordinary waking up, there are many people who are somewhere in between. But the point is that there's such a thing as being asleep, and there's such a thing as being awake. And it's important to tell the difference, and to be sure you're awake by the time you have to be up and ready for action, whatever that action may be.

Waking up is, in fact, one of the regular early Christian images for what happens when the gospel of Jesus—the good news that the creator God has acted decisively to put the world to rights—impinges on someone's consciousness. There's a good reason for this. "Sleep" was a regular way of talking about death in the ancient Jewish world. With the resurrection of Jesus, the world was being invited to wake up. "Wake up, sleeper!" writes St. Paul. "Rise from the dead! Christ will give you light!" (Ephesians 5:14).

The earliest Christians believed, in fact, that resurrection was what every human being really needed—not just in the end, in the

new world that God will eventually make, but in the present life as well. God intends, in the end, to give us a new life, in comparison with which the present one is a mere thing of shadows. He intends to give us new life within his ultimate new creation. *But the new creation has already begun with the resurrection of Jesus*, and God wants us to wake up *now*, in the present time, to the new reality. We are to come through death and out the other side into a new sort of life; to become daytime people, even though the rest of the world isn't yet awake. We are to live in the present darkness by the light of Christ, so that when the sun comes up at last we will be ready for it. Or, to change the image, we are already to be penciling the sketches for the masterpiece that God will one day call us to help him paint. That's what it means to respond to the call of the Christian gospel.

It isn't, in other words, a matter of "having a new religious experience." It may feel like that, or it may not. For some people, becoming a Christian is a deeply emotional experience; for others, it's a calm, clear-eyed resolution of matters long pondered. Our personalities are gloriously different, and God treats us all gloriously differently. In any case, some religious experiences are profoundly un- or anti-Christian. The ancient world was full of all kinds of religions, many of them deeply dehumanizing. Though we don't always recognize it, the modern world is like that, too.

So what is involved in hearing and responding to the Christian gospel? What does it mean to wake up to God's new world? What does it mean, in other words, to become a member of God's people, of Jesus's people—of the church?

The gospel—the "good news" of what the creator God has done in Jesus—is first and foremost *news about something that has happened*. And the first and most appropriate response to that news is *to believe it*. God has raised Jesus from the dead, and has thereby declared in a single powerful action that Jesus has launched the long-awaited kingdom of God, and that (by means of Jesus's death) the evil of all the world has been defeated at last. When the alarm clock goes off, this is what it says: "Here's the good news. Wake up and believe it!"

This message, though, is so utterly unlikely and extraordinary that you can't expect people simply to believe it in the same way they might believe you if you said it was raining outside. And yet, as people hear the message, at least some find that they *do* believe it. It makes sense to them. I don't mean the kind of "sense" you get within the flatland world of secular imagination. There the only things that matter are what you can put into a test tube or a bank account. I mean the kind of sense that exists within the strange new world which we glimpse, even if only for a moment, in the way we glimpse a whole new world when we stand in awe in front of a great painting, or are swept off our feet by a song or a symphony. That kind of "making sense" is much more like falling in love than like calculating a bank balance. Ultimately, believing *that* God raised Jesus from the dead is a matter of believing and trusting *in* the God who would, and did, do such a thing.

This is where our word "belief" can be inadequate or even misleading. What the early Christians meant by "belief" included both believing *that* God had done certain things and believing *in* the God who had done them. This is not belief that God exists, though clearly that is involved, too, but loving, grateful trust.

When things "make sense" in that way, you are left knowing that it isn't so much a matter of you figuring it all out and deciding to take a step, or a stand. It's a matter of Someone calling you, calling with a voice you dimly recognize, calling with a message that is simultaneously an invitation of love and a summons to obedience. The call to faith is both of these. It is the call to believe that the true God, the world's creator, has loved the whole world so much, you and me included, that he has come himself in the person of his Son and has died and risen again to exhaust the power of evil and create a new world in which everything will be put to rights and joy will replace sorrow.

The more conscious we are of our own inability to get it right, perhaps even our own flagrant disloyalty to the call to live as genuine human beings, the more we will hear this call as what it most

deeply is. It is the offer of *forgiveness*. It is the summons to receive God's gift of a slate wiped clean, a totally new start. Even to glimpse that is to catch your breath with awe and gratitude, and to find an answering, thankful love welling up inside. As we saw earlier, just as you can't set up a staircase of human logic and climb up it to get to some kind of "proof" of God, so you can't set up a staircase of human moral or cultural achievement and climb up it to earn God's favor. From time to time some Christians have imagined that they were supposed to do just that, and in their efforts they've made a nonsense of everything.

But the fact that we can't ever earn God's favor by our own moral effort shouldn't blind us to the fact that the call to faith is also a call to obedience. It must be, because it declares that Jesus is the world's rightful Lord and Master. (The language Paul used of Jesus would have reminded his hearers at once of the language they were accustomed to hearing about Caesar.) That's why Paul can speak about "the obedience of faith." Indeed, the word the early Christians used for "faith" can also mean "loyalty" or "allegiance." It's what emperors ancient and modern have always demanded of their subjects. The message of the gospel is the good news that Jesus is the one true "emperor," ruling the world with his own brand of self-giving love. This, of course, cheerfully and deliberately deconstructs the word "emperor" itself. When the early Christians used "imperial" language in relation to Jesus, they were always conscious of irony. Whoever heard of a crucified emperor?

When we see ourselves in the light of Jesus's type of kingdom, and realize the extent to which we have been living by a different code altogether, we realize, perhaps for the first time, how far we have fallen short of what we were made to be. This realization is what we call "repentance," a serious turning away from patterns of life which deface and distort our genuine humanness. It isn't just a matter of feeling sorry for particular failings, though that will often be true as well. It is the recognition that the living God has

made us humans to reflect his image into his world, and that we haven't done so. (The technical term for that is "sin," whose primary meaning is not "breaking the rules" but "missing the mark," failing to hit the target of complete, genuine, glorious humanness.) Once again, the gospel itself, the very message which announces that Jesus is Lord and calls us to obedience, contains the remedy: forgiveness, unearned and freely given, because of his cross. All we can say is, "Thank you."

To believe, to love, to obey (and to repent of our failure to do those things): faith of this kind is the mark of the Christian, the one and only badge we wear. That is why, in most traditional churches, the community declares its faith publicly in the words of one of the ancient creeds. This is the stamp of who we are. When we declare our faith, we are saying yes to this God, and to this project. That is the central mark of our identity, of who and what the church is. This, by the way, is what St. Paul meant when he spoke of "justification by faith." God declares that those who share this faith are "in the right." He intends to put the whole world to rights; he has already begun this process in the death and resurrection of Jesus, and in the work of his Spirit in the lives of men and women, bringing them to the faith by which alone we are identified as belonging to Jesus. When people come to Christian faith, they are "put in the right" as an advance sign, and as part of the means, of what God intends to do for his whole creation.

Christian faith isn't a general religious awareness. Nor is it the ability to believe several unlikely propositions. It is certainly not a kind of gullibility which would put us out of touch with any genuine reality. It is the faith which hears the story of Jesus, including the announcement that he is the world's true Lord, and responds from the heart with a surge of grateful love that says: "Yes. Jesus is Lord. He died for my sins. God raised him from the dead. This is the center of everything." Whether you come to this faith in a blinding flash or by a long, slow, winding route, once you get to this point you are (whether you realize it or not) wearing the badge which

marks you out as part of the church, on an equal footing with every other Christian who ever lived. You are discovering what it means to wake up and find yourself in God's new world.

What's more, you are giving clear evidence that a new life has begun. Somewhere in the depths of your being something has stirred into life that was previously not there. It is because of this that many early Christians reached for the language of *birth*. Jesus himself, in a famous discussion with a Jewish teacher, spoke of being born "from above": a new event similar to, though distinguished from, ordinary human birth (John 3). Many early Christians picked up and developed this idea. As a newborn baby breathes and cries, so the signs of life in a newborn Christian are faith and repentance, inhaling the love of God and exhaling an initial cry of distress. And at that point what God provides, exactly as for a newborn infant, is the comfort, protection, and nurturing promise of a mother.

Belonging to the Family

"If God is our father, the church is our mother." The words are those of the Swiss Reformer John Calvin. Several biblical passages speak in this way (notably, Galatians 4:26–27, echoing Isaiah 54:1). They underline the fact that it is as impossible, unnecessary, and undesirable to be a Christian all by yourself as it is to be a newborn baby all by yourself.

The church is first and foremost a *community*, a collection of people who belong to one another because they belong to God, the God we know in and through Jesus. Though we often use the word "church" to denote a building, the point is that it's the building *where this community meets*. True, buildings can and do carry memories, and when people have been praying and worshipping and mourning and celebrating in a particular building for many years, the building itself may come to speak powerfully of God's welcoming presence. But it is the *people* who matter.

The church exists primarily for two closely correlated purposes: to worship God and to work for his kingdom in the world. You can and must worship, and work for God's kingdom, in private and in ways unique to yourself, but if God's kingdom is to go forward, rather than around and around in circles, we must work together as well as apart.

The church also exists for a third purpose, which serves the other two: to encourage one another, to build one another up in faith, to pray with and for one another, to learn from one another and teach one another, and to set one another examples to follow, challenges to take up, and urgent tasks to perform. This is all part of what is known loosely as *fellowship*. This doesn't just mean serving one another cups of tea and coffee. It's all about living within that sense of a joint enterprise, a family business, in which everyone has a proper share and a proper place.

It is within this context that the different "ministries" within the church have grown up. From the very earliest evidence we have, in the Acts of the Apostles and the letters of Paul, the church has recognized different callings within its common life. God has given different gifts to different people so that the whole community may flourish and take forward the work with which it has been entrusted.

Worship, fellowship, and the work of reflecting God's kingdom into the world flow into and out of one another. You can't reflect God's image without returning to worship to keep the reflection fresh and authentic. In the same way, worship sustains and nourishes fellowship; without it, fellowship quickly deteriorates into groups of the like-minded, which in turn quickly become exclusive cliques—the very opposite of what Jesus's people should be aiming at.

It is within the church, even when the church isn't getting everything quite right, that the Christian faith of which we have spoken is nourished and grows to maturity. As with any family, the members discover who they are in relationship with one another. Churches

vary enormously in size, from scattered handfuls of people in isolated villages to enormous congregations of many thousands in some parts of the world. But ideally every Christian should belong to a group that is small enough for individuals to get to know and care for each other, and particularly to pray in meaningful depth for one another, and also to a fellowship large enough to contain a wide variety in its membership, styles of worship, and kingdom-activity. The smaller the local community, the more important it is to be powerfully linked to a larger unit. The larger the regular gathering (I think of those churches where several hundred, or even several thousand, meet together every week), the more important it is for each member to belong also to a smaller group. Ideally, groups of a dozen or so will meet to pray, study scripture, and build one another up in the faith.

Membership of the church begins with a single action which speaks dramatically of what believing and belonging is all about: baptism.

Through the Waters of Baptism

We ought to know the story by now. Jews, ancient and modern, have told it every year and in graphic detail: the story of how God rescued them from Egypt. He brought them through the Red Sea and led them through the wilderness into the Promised Land. *Through the water to freedom.*

The story itself began, interestingly, with the leader, Moses, being rescued as a little boy from the reedy edge of the Nile River, after his parents had placed him there in a waterproof basket rather than kill him as they had been ordered to do. Moses had to go through (on a small scale) the rescue-through-water which God would accomplish through him later on. After Moses's death, it happened again: Joshua led the people through the Jordan River and into the Promised Land at last.

These stories look back even further. Creation itself took place, according to Genesis 1, when God's great wind or breath or Spirit

brooded like a dove over the waters, and when God separated the waters into different places and called dry land to appear. Creation itself, you might say, began with an exodus, a baptism. *Through the water to new life.*

So we shouldn't be surprised when we find that one of the best-known Jewish renewal movements took shape as a new-exodus movement, and a crossing-the-Jordan movement. Jesus's cousin John believed it was his calling to get people ready for the long-awaited moment when Israel's God would fulfill his ancient promises. He called people out into the Judaeen wilderness to be baptized (the word means literally "plunged") into the Jordan River, confessing their sins. *Through the water into God's new covenant.* They were to be the purified people, the new-covenant people, the people ready for their God to come and deliver them.

Jesus himself submitted to John's baptism. He was identifying with those he had come to rescue, fulfilling the covenant plan of his Father. And as he came up from the water, God's Spirit descended on him like a dove, with a voice from heaven declaring that he was God's true Son, Israel's Messiah, the king. Jesus saw his kingdom-movement as starting with that symbolic new-exodus action.

But he also saw it pointing to the action with which his ministry would reach its climax. He spoke on one occasion about having "a baptism to be baptized with"—and it became clear that he was referring to his own death. As we saw earlier, he chose Passover, the great Jewish exodus festival, as the moment to act symbolically to challenge the authorities, knowing what was bound to happen next.

Jesus's own baptism and his carefully planned Last Supper both point back to the original exodus (the coming-through-the-water moment), point behind that to the original creation itself, and finally point on to Jesus's death and resurrection as the new defining reality, the moment of new covenant, new creation. And to achieve that renewal it was necessary to go, not just through the water and out the other side, but through a deeper flood altogether. All the

multiple layers of meaning that were already present in baptism were now to be recentered on the event of Jesus's death and resurrection. *Through the water into God's new world.*

That is why, from the earliest Christian sources we possess, Christian baptism is linked not just to Jesus's own baptism, not just to the exodus and the first creation, but to Jesus's death and resurrection. St. Paul, in one of his earliest letters, speaks of being "crucified with the Messiah" and coming through into a new life; and in his greatest work (the letter to Rome) he explains that in baptism itself we die "with the Messiah" and come through to share his risen life. The spectacular, unique events at the heart of the Christian story *happen to us*, not just at the end of our own lives and beyond (when we die physically and, eventually, when we rise again), but while we are continuing to live in the present time. *Through the water into the new life of belonging to Jesus.*

That is why, from very early on, Christian baptism was seen as the mode of entry into the Christian family, and why it was associated with the idea of being "born again." Of course, not everyone who has been through water-baptism has actually known and experienced for themselves the saving love of God in Christ sweeping through and transforming their lives. At various points Paul has to remind his readers that they have a responsibility to make real in their own lives the truth of what happened to them in baptism. But he doesn't say that baptism doesn't matter, or that it isn't real. People who have been baptized can choose to reject the faith, just as the children of Israel could rebel against YHWH after having come through the Red Sea. Paul makes that point in 1 Corinthians 10 and elsewhere. But they can't get unbaptized: God will regard them as disobedient family members rather than outsiders.

In particular, we can now see why Christian baptism involves being plunged into water (or having it poured over you) in the name of God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. The point is that the story which baptism tells is God's own story, from creation and covenant to new covenant and new creation, with Jesus in the

middle of it and the Spirit brooding over it. In baptism, *you* are brought into that story, to be an actor in the play which God is writing and producing. And once you're onstage, you're part of the action. You can get the lines wrong. You can do your best to spoil the play. But the story is moving forward, and it would be far better to understand where it's going and how to learn your lines and join in the drama. *Through the water to become part of God's purpose for the world.*