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To Mark and Jackie Royster,
whose Spirit-filled lives have been a
means of grace to many

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♦ Introduction ♦

Christ the Fountainhead of the Means of Grace

SCRIPTURAL BACKGROUND: COLOSSIANS 1:15–23

A number of years ago Willow Creek performed a survey of two thousand churches and more than a half million believers to find out what helped people grow spiritually. The assumption that has driven most churches is that any church activity will result in spiritual growth—just get people involved. Many churches have groups ranging from fellowship groups, to prayer groups, to groups that help people with their finances, or raising children, or losing weight. What they found was that only two groups among dozens that churches invest in actually helped people grow spiritually. Those were groups that focused on prayer and

on Bible study. What is remarkable is that without realizing it, Willow Creek stumbled upon two of the means of grace through a survey. If they had just read Wesley's sermon on the means of grace (sermon #16), they could have saved the three million dollars they invested in these church surveys.

The idea of the “means of grace” refers to divinely instituted means by which we can grow spiritually and includes all the ways God uses to extend His grace into our lives so that we become more like Him. Another way of putting this is that the means of grace conform us to the image of Jesus Christ—the goal of the Christian life. The concept is rooted in Scripture, though the phrase “means of grace” arises in later Christian tradition. It is taught in question #68 of the 1563 *Heidelberg Catechism* and in question #154 of the 1647 *Westminster Catechism*. Indeed, the phrase “means of grace” has a long history in both Roman Catholic and Puritan theology. But in the eighteenth century, John Wesley made it central to the process of sanctification among the people called Methodists. Prayer and reading God’s Word lead Wesley’s list, among others like fasting and taking the Eucharist, serving the poor, and so forth.

We will explore many of the means of grace in this book, but it is vital to point out as a foundational truth that Jesus Christ is the fountainhead of all the means of grace. In the opening pages of his sermon “The Means of Grace,” Wesley warns us all not to confuse the *means* of grace with either the *source* or the *end* of grace. The means separated from the end is “less than nothing and vanity.” In fact, Wesley says that doing a lot of religious activity in and of itself is to turn “God’s arms against himself; of keeping Christianity out of the heart by those very means which were ordained for the bringing it in.” In other words, there is no inherent power—like some kind of magic—in the means of grace, even though God ordained them, because we cannot confuse the means for the end. There are many means of grace, but only one end of grace; namely, Christ Himself. And there is only one source of grace—the triune God, though our focus here will be upon Christ as the central means of grace. So, the means of grace do not begin with what we do but who He is, lest we get off on the wrong track at the outset. This is why our text for this chapter is Colossians 1:15–23 and the following section is called *The Preeminence of Jesus Christ*. In practicing the means of grace, we are to be *seeking Jesus*.

The Preeminence of Jesus Christ

Colossians 1:15–20 (Christ Hymn) and 21–23 (Admonition)

The passage found in Colossians 1:15–20 is likely an early creedal hymn about Christ that Paul inserts into this part of his letter. There are quite a few of these creedal hymns in the New Testament (including Luke 1:47–55; 68–79; 2:29–32; Heb. 1:5–12; Eph. 5:14; 2 Tim. 2:11–13; and Rev. 4:8, 11; 5:9–10, 12–13). So, we have right in the New Testament a glimpse of very early Christology from the earliest hymns of the church. Isn't it wonderful how the early church would embed doctrine and theology together in an act of worship? This hymn (vv. 15–20) celebrates Christ's supremacy over creation and redemption. We become sharers in His preeminence and glory because we are “in Christ.” The last few verses, 21–23, are the *application* of the hymn to our lives, and this is precisely how I will use this early hymn in this chapter.

There are many suggestions about the background of this hymn, but I think the most convincing explanation is that this is a Christological hymn written in light of the creation account in Genesis 1 and 2. In other words, it is the creation account from Genesis set as an act of worship that puts Christ at the center of both creation and

redemption. The hymn makes five central affirmations about Christ and one grand proclamation to undergird all the others.

1. Christ is the image of the invisible God—v. 15
2. Christ is the firstborn over all creation—v. 15
3. Christ is the creator and sustainer of all things—vv. 16–17
4. Christ is the head of the church—v. 18
5. Christ is the reconciler of all things—v. 20

Because He is the Lord of both creation (vv. 15–17) and redemption (vv. 18, 20), we have woven in with these five the summative statement of them all in verse 19, which declares that “in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell.” This full-throated declaration of the deity of Christ is repeated in Colossians 2:9, so I don’t see this as just another declaration in the list but the very foundation that makes the other five possible. Jesus Christ is God in the flesh.

This passage (with these central five affirmations plus the grand proclamation) forms one of the most important bedrock Christological passages in the New Testament. This hymn was crucial in the discussions leading up to the formal understanding of who Christ is by the early

church. In this chapter I will focus on the first, second, and fifth of these.

Christ Is the Image of the Invisible God—v. 15

Christ has made the invisible God fully visible and manifest. The apostle John makes this point in his gospel when he declares that “no one has ever seen God; the only God, who is at the Father’s side, he has made him known” (John 1:18). This hymn takes it a step further by declaring that Jesus is the perfect image or reflection of God. The doctrine of the image of God is foundational to the creation account: “Let us make man in our image, after our likeness . . . So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female, he created them” (Gen. 1:26–27). The phrase “image of God” is applied to no other creative act of God other than the creation of man and woman. This separates us from the rest of creation. We represent God’s imprint, His presence in the world. To be created in the image of God means, among other things, that we have been called to be coregents with God in extending (via our faithful stewardship and dominion) His rule and reign into the world. But, as image-bearers we have marred that image

and exchanged our dominion role for one that places us in bondage to sin. The phrase “image of God” is never mentioned in the Old Testament after Genesis 9:6. Now, in Christ, the image of God has been fully restored and made manifest in Christ who reflects the image of God in a singular way. Because Christ is fully God *and* fully man, He not only reflects God’s revelation of Himself to us but also shows us what we are destined to be as image-bearers. Jesus is the revelation of both God and man to us!

This is the crucial bridge upon which all the means of grace are focused to conform you and me as image-bearers (marred by sin) into the full image of Christ (free from the bondage of sin). Therefore, the means of grace have been given to us to fully restore the image of God in us. The means of grace are God’s great mirror repair job!

The image of God explodes afresh in the New Testament, but it is now focused on Christ as the image of God. It is not just here in Colossians 1:15 but also in 2 Corinthians 4:4 and Romans 8:29. From the recommissioning of Noah until the coming of Christ, the image of God is portrayed through a kind of anti-image, where we are not regarded as image-bearers but as idol-bearers. The Old Testament is filled with the phrases “false image,” “graven image,” “idolatrous image,” and so forth. But

doesn't a false image imply that there must be a *true* one, of which this is a departure? The image that idolatry mars is the image of God. We who were made in the image of God have turned and are fashioning false images of God, using stone, wood, metal, and eventually bank accounts or whatever else we reflect and value. All idolatry is a kind of anti-image bearing. The means of grace are designed to deliver you and me from all idolatry and fully restore the image of God in us.

Our text reminds us that Jesus Christ is the image of God in human flesh. Christ comes as a second Adam (Rom. 5:12–21), and He comes, in part, to fully restore the image of God, which has been mangled and severely damaged through idolatry. In the New Testament, the whole notion of the image of God is applied supremely to Jesus Christ, who is the ultimate visible representation of the invisible God of the universe. As the fullness of deity, Jesus perfectly images God in all His fullness, but as the fullness of humanity, Jesus perfectly shows us what it means to bear God's image in our redeemed humanity. The New Testament teaches that Jesus in both His deity and His full humanity manifests the true, unbroken image of God because the two natures of Christ—His humanity and His deity—are united in the one person. You cannot

separate them. God has stepped into this world. We call this the incarnation. G. K. Chesterton once famously said that even those who reject the doctrine of the incarnation are different for having heard of it. It is in Christ that the entire broken world is refashioned and, once again, restored to reflect God's image. As the perfect image of God, Jesus Christ completes the original vocation of humanity and thereby shows us who we were originally intended to be. Christ is God's image in the world, fully active, fully alive, in a way we have not seen since the dawn of creation. The means of grace are given to conform us back to that unmarred image seen in the restored humanity of Christ as the second Adam.

Christ Is the Firstborn over All Creation—v. 15

This phrase has caused great confusion in the church, because calling Christ the “firstborn” seems, on a superficial reading, to undermine traditional, orthodox Christology that affirms the preexistence of Christ from all eternity (Heb. 1:6; Rev. 1:5). What does it mean to affirm that He is the “firstborn over all creation”? The term *firstborn* is used in a way it would be understood by a Jew in the first century. The term appears 130 times

in the Greek version of the Old Testament known as the Septuagint. A survey of those 130 times reveals that there are two ways it is used. The first, obvious way, is a *biological* firstborn child who is born and is temporally prior to other children who are born in a family. But the second way is a *declared* title, a manifest position that has nothing to do with biology. For example, in Psalm 89:27 God says of David, “I will make him the firstborn” (i.e., David is granted an exalted position and a greater inheritance symbolized by firstborn even though he is not God’s biological offspring at all, nor the biological firstborn of his own family, having seven older brothers). Thus, one could be “appointed” or “declared” a firstborn as a title or position.

The phrase “firstborn over all creation” has three dimensions to it. First, it refers to the special prerogative given to the eternally begotten Son. As the firstborn son he is granted an inheritance, one aspect of which is that he is the Lord over the creation. When the Bible uses a word like *firstborn*, it does not mean that there was a time when the Son of God did not exist. It means rather that He is granted the inheritance of the whole creation, including all the nations, as the eternal Son of God and is therefore eternally begotten.

Second, the word *firstborn* is also shorthand for the doctrine of the incarnation, and this *does* have a temporal aspect to it. As the incarnate one, He did take on human flesh in real time and space, born as the God-man through the womb of Mary. God *became* a man—with no compromise in the full force of that declaration! God in Jesus Christ enters into the creation of His own making. As Adam was in a certain respect the firstborn of the first creation, Jesus Christ, as the second Adam, is the firstborn over the new creation.

Third, the phrase is also shorthand for His status as the resurrected one; He is the firstfruits of the resurrection. Jesus Christ is the first to be resurrected as we will all someday be resurrected. Therefore, Jesus is the firstborn of this new redeemed humanity. Our resurrection is all linked to His resurrection since He is the head, the firstfruits, and firstborn of the redeemed community.

Just as Christ reclaims and makes manifest what it means to be in the unblemished image of God and the means of grace are given to reconform us to the image of God, so, too, Christ being declared the “firstborn over creation” is about us reclaiming our rightful inheritance in Christ. In the Old Testament, being a firstborn son carried a special place of privilege with special claims to

inheritance. In the incarnation God sends His firstborn Son, Jesus Christ—the only begotten one—to earth to reclaim His lost children and adopt us as His sons and daughters, declaring us all to have the inheritance of firstborn sons because we are now in Christ. Romans 8:23 declares that we are awaiting our full adoption as sons by which we can claim our full inheritance. Hebrews 12:23 calls us “the assembly of the firstborn.” If you are a woman reading these passages, it is good and right for you to celebrate that you are an elect daughter of the Most High God. But, as a woman, you are still a full inheritor of the claims of sonship, which is bound up with Christ’s title as the firstborn. All women are declared inheritors of sonship, even as they are also daughters. Women are “daughered sons.” Men, also, though we are biologically sons, are full members of the bride of Christ. My being a male no more robs me of being part of the bride of Christ than being a woman robs our female readers of being part of the inheritance of sonship as part of the theology of the firstborn. It is not about biology but a declared status about our inheritance. God is beyond human gender, but He uses the relational language of fatherhood and sonship in order to communicate His redemptive purposes. If you are in Christ, you are inheritors of all the inheritance that Christ

embodies and the means of grace have been given so that every one of you can claim your inheritance.

Christ Is the Reconciler of All Things—v. 20

In Colossians 1:19 Paul says, “In him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell.” He repeats it in Colossians 2:9—“For in him the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily,” which is the grand takeaway or central theme that makes all the others possible. The fifth and final declaration is that Christ is the reconciler of all things. Jesus is the fountainhead of cosmic reconciliation. Paul says in 1:20 that God is working “through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of his cross.” Just as there are three dimensions to Christ’s title as firstborn, there are three dimensions to His work of cosmic reconciliation. First, it is an *eschatological*, or “end time” statement, pointing to the end point in human history when God will set all things right. Even those opposed to Him will eventually acknowledge His lordship in the way we see expressed in the famous passage in Philippians: “Every knee should bow . . . and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord” (2:10–11). Second, it is a truth declaration like the angels on the day of resurrection:

“He is not here, He is risen.” The Colossians hymn declares a cosmic truth to the world that Jesus is the reconciler. Paul is speaking about what is, not about the myriad ways people may or may not reflect this truth.

Third, it is a long-view, aspirational, historical statement. Even in the face of the unbelieving world, Paul is anticipating the global mission of the church, which will bring the gospel to the ends of the earth. The gospel is, at heart, a message of reconciliation! All three of these dimensions celebrate the supremacy of Christ’s identity as the fountainhead and sole source of God’s work of reconciliation.

The means of grace are not just about what God does in your *heart*. They are also enabling you to embody reconciliation. Many of you are carrying around inside of you deep hurts, disappointments, betrayals. We all see the challenges of racism in the world. This has given birth to anxiety, anger, the inability to trust anyone, cynicism, and for some, a foreboding sense of despair. The means of grace move us toward reconciliation, with our past, our parents, all races of people, and all those with whom we have a broken relationship, and most of all, with God Himself.

Christ came into this world for you. Listen to Paul’s words of application after the end of this amazing

Colossians hymn: “He has now reconciled in his body of flesh by his death, in order to present you holy and blameless and above reproach before him” (1:22). The whole universe is moving toward reconciliation. God is the victor over all the world’s brokenness and all the ways we mar the image of God. The means of grace are given for that very purpose.

So, in summary,

1. Jesus Christ is the means of grace through which we become conformed, once again, to the image of God.
2. The means of grace enable us to fully claim our inheritance “in Christ” through which we are sharers in the full rights of the firstborn.
3. And the means of grace enable us to move from being alienated from God to being reconciled to God and one another.

The rest of this book will develop all the particulars of the means of grace with Christ as the fountainhead, standing as both the source and the goal of all the means of grace.

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♦ Chapter One ♦

The Church as a Means of Grace

The Universal Call and the Radical Transformation

SCRIPTURAL BACKGROUND: EPHESIANS 4:17–5:20

The church is itself a means of grace. The passage from Ephesians 4:17–5:20 has several headings suggested by modern editors. The NIV (1984) calls it “Living as Children of the Light.” The ESV calls this section “The New Life.” The RSV calls it the “The Old Life and the New.” I would suggest titling this section of Paul’s letter to the Ephesians (4:17–5:20) “The Transformed Life,” because that is the theme of this section. Paul is addressing the church in Ephesus with a particular focus on the influx of Gentiles into the church and the need to make sure that these believers with no background in Jewish practices of

holiness become partakers of holiness and embodied righteousness, as well as the necessity for the church to be a living, transformative people who vibrantly extend the sanctifying grace of God.

The Transformed Life

Paul highlights in this section the life that is ours when we become partakers of the sanctifying grace of God. At verse 17, Paul begins boldly by bearing witness to a remarkable transformation that takes place among the people of God, the church. He is testifying to a new, radical identity that embraces, yet supersedes, all other identities.

In every culture the defining marks of identity are ethnicity, gender, language, social status, and cultural experience. These are the five leading, powerful, and formative forces that shape our identity. The gospel does not obliterate these, and even in John's vision of the future church at the end of time, he sees men and women of every tribe, tongue, and language worshiping the Lord. But, Paul is saying that our *new* identity in Christ is so powerful and so transformative that this becomes an altogether new and controlling identity that supersedes without supplanting all other identities. We belong to

Christ and we are the baptized community of those who have been united to His life. In today's identity-fractured culture, this insight alone is priceless. This is why Paul can say in Colossians 3:11 that in Christ "there is not Greek or Jew, circumcised or uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave, free; but Christ is all, and in all." Being in Christ is your new and primary identity!

Paul's testimony goes on to set forth a new life that is a stunning alternative to all the world's ways of looking at the human experience. We are no longer to walk in step with the Gentile world from which we once drew our identity. Once we were captivated by what was going on with Taylor Swift, Beyoncé, or Kevin Hart; we really cared about the latest Instagram shots or YouTube videos that went viral, the outcome of some fantasy football game, the latest clothing styles, or even our ethnic identity. But, those things fade, or are put in their proper perspective, when we draw our identity from Jesus Christ. Paul notes two trajectories of the old life in the flesh: the mind and the heart. Paul begins by saying that we are no longer to walk as the Gentiles walk in "the futility of their minds" (Eph. 4:17), which implies an emptiness, or a purposelessness, or even instability in their thinking. Second, our hearts have become

corrupt. We, as humans, have given ourselves over to “sensuality, greedy to practice every kind of impurity” (v. 19). In other words, our hearts and our minds have become corrupted and cut off from the life of God. This does not imply that every unbeliever is marked by these specific traits, but that these are the kinds of qualities that get reproduced over and over in the lives of those who remain disconnected from Christ. The particularities may vary, but the corruption of the mind and the heart is the basic theme, though it may manifest itself in many different ways.

So, here’s the setting: brand-new Gentile believers are coming into the church, and Paul is earnestly hoping that they can be effectively incorporated into the people of God.

This is where the church comes in as the means of grace through which God extends His transforming grace into our lives. The church is always a means of grace to the world because we offer both the grace to radically and unconditionally and universally embrace a lost world with the love of Jesus Christ *and* the grace of God that enables us to flourish and be transformed into the very likeness of Jesus Christ. These are the two ways the church expresses itself as a means of grace—through the radical call and the radical transformation.

Radical, Open Call of the Church to the World

We all have seen signs in front of churches that try to express our open, radical love in Jesus Christ for the world. One sign that is used around the country was taken from a book entitled *A Step Along the Way*¹ and expresses this open call in a direct way:

We extend a special welcome to those who are single, married, divorced, gay, filthy rich, dirt poor, y no hable Ingles. We extend a special welcome to those who are crying newborns, skinny as a rail, or could afford to lose a few pounds. . . . We don't care if you're . . . more Catholic than the Pope, or haven't been in church since little Joey's Baptism. We extend a special welcome to those who are over 60 but not grown up yet, and to teenagers who are growing up too fast. We welcome soccer moms, NASCAR dads, starving artists, tree-huggers, latte-sippers, vegetarians, junk-food eaters. We welcome

1. Stephen J. Pope, *A Step Along the Way: Models of Christian Service* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Press, 2015), 123–24. The author attributes the first appearance of this sign to the Lady of Lourdes Catholic Church in Daytona Beach, Florida.

those who are in recovery or are still addicted. We welcome you if you're having problems, or you're down in the dumps, or if you don't like "organized religion" (we've been there, too). If you blew all your offering at the dog track, you're welcome here. We offer special welcome to those who think the earth is flat, work too hard, don't work, can't spell, or came because grandma is in town and wanted to go to church. We welcome those who are inked, pierced, or both. We offer a special welcome to those who could use a prayer right now, had religion shoved down your throat as a kid, or got lost in traffic and wound up here by mistake. . . . We welcome tourists, seekers, doubters, bleeding hearts . . . and you!

Let's examine this sign and see how it fits into our passage of Scripture. This sign is a powerful expression of the prevenient grace of God. It is an expression of the "whosoever" of John 3:16. It is an expression of that powerful text in Isaiah 55:1, "Come, everyone who thirsts, come to the waters; and he who has no money, come, buy and eat!" It is this text which Jesus Himself draws on in John 7:37 when He cries out in a loud voice at the Jewish festival: "If anyone thirsts, let him come

to me and drink.” This is the theological point Paul is making when he says in Romans, “While we were still sinners, Christ died for us” (5:8).

In the language of our text, this sign acknowledges that we all come to Christ clothed in what Paul calls our “old self” (i.e., with dirty clothes on). We come as we are. Paul says we are welcoming those who are deceivers (4:22), liars (4:25), people with anger issues (4:26, 31), thieves (4:28), people who are bitter (4:31), sexually immoral (5:3), etc. It sounds like this sign, just some of the examples are different. We do come just as we are, but Christ transforms us! Paul’s point is this kind of life is what you *were*, but you have put off those clothes and you are now clothed in Jesus Christ. That’s why he goes on to say, “Do not get drunk with wine . . . Instead, be filled with the Spirit” (Eph. 5:18). This is the language of transformation. The radical call of the New Testament it is always tied to repentance: “The kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe the gospel” (Mark 1:15).

When I was in high school, I was on the typing team and did competitive typing across the state of Georgia. Any good typist will tell you that fast typing is possible only when your left hand and your right hand are in perfect coordination and rhythm. If 1 Corinthians 13:1 is written

by only using the left hand of the typewriter keyboard, it reads like this: "f sea te tges f e r f ages bt d t ave ve a a resdg gg r a cagg cba." If you use both hands, it reads correctly: "If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal."

If we only extend the radical, inclusive call, we actually speak in gibberish. Even though every stroke of the left hand was accurate, it takes both to speak with gospel coherence. Alternatively, if we focus inward and become separatists and judgmental, we can lose our heart for a lost world, and then we also speak gibberish. We become a clanging cymbal. Both of these must be brought together to speak coherently to the world about what it means to be a Christian.

The Church as the Arena for Radical Transformation

So now we symbolically arrive at the church with all of our rags on, and we witness the transformation of the church of Jesus Christ who have availed themselves of the means of grace. When we, or *if* we, cross over and become members of the baptized community, we must take off those dirty clothes and be clothed with the garments of the church.

The metaphor of “taking off” and “putting on” is a common theme throughout Scripture. Isaiah 61:10 is one of the texts upon which the New Testament builds when it declares, “For he has clothed me with garments of salvation and arrayed me in a robe of righteousness.” This metaphor is repeated throughout the New Testament, defining what it means to belong to the people of God and the new life in Jesus Christ. Here are a few examples:

Do not lie to one other, seeing that you have put off the old self with its practices and have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge after the image of its creator. (Col. 3:9–10)

Let us cast off the works of darkness and put on the armor of light. . . . But put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires. (Rom. 13:12, 14)

For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ. (Gal. 3:27)

Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, looking to

Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God. (Heb. 12:1–2)

. . . to put off your old self, which belongs to your former manner of life and is corrupt through deceitful desires, and to be renewed in the spirit of your minds, and to put on the new self, created after the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness. (Eph. 4:22–23)

If we allow the radical, unconditional, inclusive call to be separated from the radical transformation via the new life in Christ, then we have fractured God's work and it is known as cheap grace. It is cheap grace that pretends that the first half of the gospel can be separated from the second half of the gospel and not call for transformation. This cheap grace drives a wedge between justification and sanctification and presumes upon the grace of God while we continue to live in sin. Cheap grace separates the radical call from the radical transformation.

In my youth I was a Boy Scout and loved to go cave exploring. I remember once I arrived home late on Sunday afternoon after a weekend of cave exploring. I knocked on

the door, and my own mother wouldn't let me in the house! I was too filthy. She told me to leave those filthy clothes in the carport and then come in. This is a metaphor of God's own love for us. We are warmly received at the door of salvation, but the Lord says to us, in effect, "Take off those dirty clothes, and I will clothe you in the garments of Christ."

Parable of the Prodigal Son

Remember the parable of the prodigal son in Luke 15? The younger son had taken his inheritance and went off to the far country and squandered his money with loose living and prostitutes. It is a picture of a person who has clothed himself with the world and eventually finds himself in a pig's sty, longing to eat the pods the pigs were eating. He and his clothes were filthy from wallowing with the swine. He eventually repented and returned to his father and in great humility said, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son. Treat me as one of your hired servants" (Luke 15:19). In a wonderful picture of grace, the father ran to meet him, embraced him, and reinstated him to his former position as a son (that is the radical acceptance), and then clothed him by putting a robe on him, symbolic of the transformation

that happens when we come to Christ in repentance (Luke 15:22). Perhaps the sign on the church should have concluded with the verse, “If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come” (2 Cor. 5:17).

The radical call of the gospel should never be leveraged against the holiness that characterizes the church of Jesus Christ. It is a false narrative that if we speak of holiness we are denying the radical embracing love of Jesus Christ! Paul makes it very clear that those who live in darkness cannot inherit the kingdom of God (Eph. 5:5). We are a transformed community. As we cross over and become full members of the baptized community of the people of God, we are a peculiar people clothed in righteousness and holiness. When we come to Christ, we bring with us all the same muddled thinking and unholy lives that the world has, and Christ Himself sets out to transform us by His very divine presence. He has chosen the church to be a key instrument—a means of grace for that transformation. Transformation is never bad news; it is part of the good news, because it is a call to human flourishing.

Even if the sign on the church were left as it is, perhaps the back of the sign should read like this when you leave

the church: “But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light” (1 Peter 2:9).

The Church as Sealed in the Means of Grace by the Spirit of God

Finally, Paul reminds us that the Holy Spirit is the seal of the means of grace. Without the Spirit we end up with either legalism or the collapse of holiness. In Ephesians 4:30 Paul turns to the third person of the Trinity when he says, “Do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, by whom you were sealed for the day of redemption.” In 5:18 he commands us, “Be filled with the [Holy] Spirit.” Why the transition to the Holy Spirit? The Holy Spirit is particularly grieved when we walk as the world walks because the Holy Spirit is the primary agent of our sanctification. The Holy Spirit has been charged to empower us as Christ’s sanctified church. Without the Spirit we cannot live in the grace of God. We must never forget that the operative word in the phrase “means of grace” is *grace*. God does something in us that we cannot accomplish through our own strength. There is an old poem that beautifully sums up the powerlessness of

the Law to make us holy compared to the inner work of the Holy Spirit. It goes like this:

*To work and to run the law demands;
But gives us neither feet nor hands;
Better news the gospel brings,
It bids us fly and gives us wings!*

The gospel has an even higher standard than the Old Testament law and yet gives us the power to live it out! This is not self-empowered holy living but a holiness enabled through the power of the Holy Spirit. Paul goes on to highlight three examples of what we are to “put off” (Eph. 4:22) if we are to be followers of Christ: corrupting talk (4:29), unforgiveness (4:32), and sexual immorality (5:3). Just think what a radiant light the church would be if just those three things were embodied by the church: truth and wholesome speech, not crude discourse; forgiveness, not harboring bitterness and unforgiveness; and sexual purity, not sexual immorality. If we, through the power of the Spirit of God, were to manifest those three admonitions, then the beauty of the Christian community would almost instantly rise up above this culture in stunning ways. We would actually be on our way to embodying a holy community who exemplifies both the radical call and the radical transformation.