



## First Focus

Being a  
Lifetime Diver

### On Baptism

*Historically, baptism has been the central ordinance for entrance into the Church, the first great obedient act of a new follower of Christ. It is a public declaration of an individual being fully incorporated in the work and mission of Christ.*

Most of us are familiar with its common root meaning of “**immersion**” which makes this a meaningful spiritual metaphor for those who are first **diving** into Christ. However, the great weight and beauty of baptism is not simply for those early in their journey with Christ, but also those who dove in long ago.

The verb “**baptō**” has two common uses outside of Scripture in the 1st Century. One refers “**to dye**” as in the dipping of an object in a coloring solution. The other use is describing **someone drowning or the sinking of a ship**. “**Baptō**” appears related to the “**to dye**” usage in **Rev 19:13**. “**He [Jesus] is clothed in a robe dipped in blood, and the name by which he is called is The Word of God.**” Our baptism is our identifying marker throughout life. We must remind ourselves that we identify with the atoning sacrifice of Christ in repentance **and** adoption.

**Mark 10:38-39** also gives baptism a context important for more mature Christians. Christ is referring to **being overwhelmed and submerged** into suffering. This suffering is our divinely called journey and mission to complete for His glory. It is in this **immersion of suffering** that we must never forget that our baptism is a reminder that we follow Christ into suffering, He is with us. Suffering is much **like drowning or a sinking ship**, uncontrollable factors create a circumstance that overwhelms us with a uncertain future.

Jewish customs had evolved to required purification washings via **immersion** during the time of Christ. These washings were never a one time event, as in if one became impure afterwards another cleansing was required. It was also a self-immersion, you had to do it yourself. This makes John the Baptist very distinct, because He was baptizing other people. **The gospel is a message of God's favor outside of our merit or doing.** Our mission is a mission much like John the Baptist's. To accept the call to lead others to be immersed in the work and mission of Christ. To be baptized as a Christian is to receive and to be received into the whole divine story of God's new creation.

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## On Advent

We are approaching a season of the year traditionally referred to as Advent. Do we know what this terminology means? Is that just another term for Christmas? The word ‘**advent**’ is from the latin word for ‘**coming**’. The period we celebrate the birth or ‘**coming**’ of Christ is considered advent. It is not the beginning of God the Son, like a typical birth would be, but the coming of a previously existent being. The reasoning for its significance is we also want to acknowledge that we are expecting another coming (the second coming or advent), which will not be by birth of a child

Distinguishing Advent from simply the Christmas season, allows us to be calculated with a rich emphasis and tradition. The two primary advent emphasis are this: **(1) a time for expectant waiting** and **(2) a time to prepare for celebration**. To observe advent is to enter into a personal time of self-reflection, not for necessarily sin confession or identifying areas to improve but to place oneself in the expectant mindset.

Let us share the longing for the Messiah and also be alert of His second coming. Let this time remind us of what Jesus told Peter in the Garden of Gethsemane in Matthew 26:41 “**Watch and pray that you may not enter into temptation. The spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak.**” It is a great way to start 2017 off with celebration and excitement, but it doesn't have to wait until New Year's Eve. Celebrate this season and refocus on the hope and joy that the Kingdom's invitation brings.

Theologian Karl Barth in his book, “Christmas” wrote, “*Unfulfilled and fulfilled promise are related to each other, as are dawn and sunrise. Both are promise and in fact the same promise. If anywhere at all, then it is precisely in the light of the coming of Christ that faith has become Advent faith, the expectation of future revelation. But faith knows for whom and for what it is waiting. It is fulfilled faith because it lays hold on the fulfilled promise.*” May it be us.



# On Sacrifice

*Imagine all the important factors in nursing a fire, eg. the placement of the wood, the temperature of the flames or the amount of moisture present. Keeping a fire going can be quite a chore. Often times the reason a fire goes out is simply the lack of constant attention.*

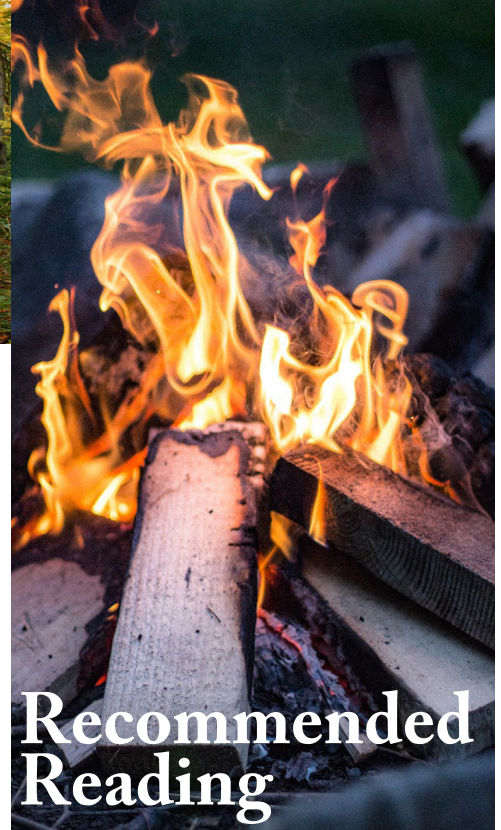
Much like a neglected fire, we often neglect our service, sacrifice, and ultimately worship by unintentionally considering service, sacrifice and worship as intermittent (*alternately ceasing and beginning again*). However, throughout all of scripture, God places a high value on **consistent human attention** to our obedience.

In the Old Testament, the tabernacle and later the temple were a central visualization of worship, service and sacrifice. The dictionary definition of sacrifice is “**an act of giving up something valued for the sake of something else regarded as more important or worthy.**” Whether its the Passover, the tabernacle, or Christ Himself, scripture presents this act as where service and worship intersect. One of the themes emphasized of the temple and tabernacle in the Old Testament is that each uniquely required **constant human attention**. The same Hebrew root word is used for ‘service’ and ‘worshippers’ for this very reason. The priests in the Old Testament considered their role and responsibility to be of continual preparation.

Paul takes this idea of ‘constant human attention’ to a new level in Romans 12:1, **‘present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship.’** To be living is to require **constant attention**. Whether its cleansing, feeding, or exercising, to be living is to be in a dynamic state, which is constantly changing and requiring new responses for a changing environment. Nothing about living is static or lacking in action or change.

Often our religion is static, and we use sacrifice as our rationalizing savior. People often pigeonhole their understanding of sacrifice into an idea of **giving from the margin**. This is as true today as it was in Jesus’ day and a large part of the reasoning behind Jesus’ words’ in Matthew 9:13. A true form of sacrifice and comfort are antithetical. Fasting is a clear example to help us understanding sacrifice in this way. Fasting is the giving up of something your body finds very valuable (food), but also it requires **the constant attention to reprioritize** our values and press on through the uncomfortable environment. We can’t truly fast from the margin, that is simply called a diet. Uncomfortableness is required. **Constant focus** is essential. Both make sacrifice achieve what it is intended to accomplish.

**Jesus calls us into His suffering** (Matt 16:24). This “taking of our cross” is a sacrifice and a surrender of our values which are painfully uncomfortable to us and **always requiring our attention**. We are to daily take our cross and embrace suffering. Jesus not only made a sacrifice but also was a sacrifice. To follow the Suffering Servant is to give our sacrifice (whether time, talents, or resources) **the constant heart attention** and complete surrender true worship requires. The sacrifice God looks for is no longer in the temple, but the **daily** commitment of life lived within the constraints and relationships of this world. Sacrifice as a static religious ritual is transformed into a dynamic nonritual expression of the Spirit, which guides us and abides in us continually throughout our life.



## Recommended Reading

*Making Sense of God: An Invitation to the Skeptical.* Tim Keller. 2016

*The Paradox of Choice: Why More is Less.* Barry Schwartz. 2004.

*God Dreams: 12 Vision Templates for Finding and Focusing Your Church's Future.* Will Mancini. 2016.

## Bibliography

*Organic Outreach for Families.* Kevin Harney & Sherry Harney. 2012.

*Spiritual Influence: The Hidden Power Behind Leadership.* Mel Lawrenz. 2012.

*Christmas.* Karl Barth. 1958.

*Evangelical Dictionary of Theology.* ed Walter Elwell. ‘**Advent**,’ P. Toon 2001

*Eerdmans Dictionary of the Bible, ‘Baptism,’* Laurence Hull Stookey. 2000

*Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels* (The IVP Bible Dictionary Series). ed Joel Green, ‘**Baptism**,’ E. Ferguson. 1992.





# On Leadership

## Being Leaders who follow

**The best leaders are also the best followers.** Often times these leaders have been dynamically influenced by God and by other people then they are driven for others to benefit from what they have experienced.

Conversely, some of the most unhealthy leaders are those who think they know better than anyone else, and who relish the isolation of being out ahead of everyone else. But even the best trailblazers, **can not simply reject the our universal need for outside positive influence.** I know I have had to repent of thinking somewhat this way.

The best leaders we have ever followed did not learn leading by solely leading, but by **following** as

well. So our leadership question is this: **How well are we following?**

Sometimes the conversation seems like a person is either a leader or follower and we fail to see how one can be both. **Our Christian paradigm of service, influence, and leadership is rooted in the calling of Jesus: "Follow me."** This **"following"** for the 12 disciples took the form of actual presence with Jesus. Their feet on the ground, their ears attuned, their eyes focused on Jesus. Peter, James, and John, did not sign up for a distant learning seminar. They literally followed.

They entered into a relationship with Jesus in which they were **fully exposed** to both his words and his deeds, 24 hours a day. Their

weakness were sure to be exposed. These disciples were formed not only by what they heard but also by what they saw.

Today leaders follow Jesus by being in His presence though prayer and mediation as their primary means of learning. The disciples' **"following"** took the form of listening. But not merely hearing words, but entering into a process of question and answer, sleep on it, then back at the **process of refining.**

Today leaders follow the disciples in to this same difficult process. The voice of God can be subtle and require long-term discernment. But if we want to lead others, we have to be able to hear the soft voice of God and **follow it.**

# On Families

## Extended Family Members Need Extended Attention.

Sometimes in life there is a hang up in an area of our influence in which we have a special responsibility, our extended family. **We pray as a church that we can be intentional about our extended family as well as our immediate family throughout the Holidays of 2016.** The most important thing to remember is that this influence is a **marathon** and not a **sprint.** We have to have patience.

So many times, we don't know what sticks out in their minds about our encounters with them. However, over the holidays this year, know that the prayers, sharing, friendships and risk-taking conversations will be worth it. Feel honored that God would place you in a such a position where important opportunities will be long term. Never give up on them.

Realize the role will often be a simple one, a chain link in the connection between them and God. God will do the pulling, we focus on being strong when needed. We should do our best to not to closed doors and burn bridges due to the long term potential of the influence. But we must not be afraid to speak to spiritual issues. Simply share what God is doing in your life. These are unique seeds that God will use throughout 2017 and beyond!





# Conversation Starters

## On Baptism

1. If you have been baptized, summarize for group members what the experience was like for you.
2. Depending on your age, what do you remember most? How did your baptism affect you at the time?
3. How does your baptism affect you now?
4. Witnessing others being baptized often causes us to reflect on our own experience. How might our observing other baptisms influence and encourage us today? See Romans 6:1-4; Col 2:9-12.

## On Sacrifice

1. How would you describe the difference between a living sacrifice and a dead sacrifice is (Romans 12:1)?
2. After pondering Romans 12:1-2, Why do you think Paul uses the imagery of "living sacrifices" to describe our proper response to God's mercy?
3. As you serve God, do you find it easy to be listening for God? Why or why not?
4. How can our sacrifices prevent us from being lead and guided by the Holy Spirit?

'I appeal to you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship.'

Romans 12:1



## On Leadership

1. Can you think of a time when some seemingly small decisions led to huge change or breakthrough for you?
2. God may speak through other people or through circumstances. Do you expose your decisions to wise counsel? How do you crosscheck your decisions?
3. Create margin to listen. Do you have time set aside in your day, or special methods to hone your listening skills? Where can you create some margin?
4. How can you be intentional to follow special people God has placed in your life?

## On Advent

1. What do you most look forward to on Christmas day?
2. What distracts you from focusing on Christ as you prepare for Christmas/Advent?
3. Thinking ahead over the month of December and your commitments, what changes can you make to focus in on Christ? What do you think you can remove, add, or alter?
4. What can you do this Advent season to ensure it is one of joy-filled hope instead of fear-based anxiety?
5. Discuss this quote from Joan Chittister, **"The function of advent is to remind us what we're waiting for as we go through life too busy with things that do not matter to remember the things that do."**