

**Embracing Grace, Scot McKnight, copyright 2005  
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**Book Description**

In our highly individualistic culture, the message of Jesus is often reduced to a private spirituality concerned only with getting to heaven. Jesus' message however is much bigger. The story of the Scriptures is a holistic story concerned with the redemption of all things. In his short book *Embracing Grace*, Scot McKnight offers a compelling way to think about the fullness of Jesus' message and what implications it carries for Christians. This is a short book of 176 pages.

**Chapter 1-Performing the Gospel**

**Study written by Brad Nelson**

**Quotes to think about**

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"The gospel is the work of God to restore humans to union with God and communion with others, in the context of a community, for the good of others and the world" (p. xiii).

"Thus, it is a gospel that is both proclaimed and performed. The first without the latter is hypocrisy; the second without the first is not the gospel. But, together they tell God's story so satisfyingly that others are compelled to join along" (p. 3).

"In fact, how a person lived showed what they really believed. 'By their fruit,' Jesus said in the Sermon on the Mount, 'you will know them' "(p. 4).

"The reason the gospel has been around as long as it has been, besides Providence itself, is that it tells our story better than we can tell our own" (p. 5).

"This generation doesn't want something that tells them that everything is good...A stronger way of saying it is this: this generation is challenging the Church to perform what it proclaims, or, to use less elegant language, to put up or shut up" (p. 7).

"A church always performs the gospel it proclaims because its performance is its proclamation. If you look at a church and what it does and how it operates you will see the gospel of that church" (p. 11).

"They decided to fix the building, not by hiring it out, but with volunteer labor from their own church and other communities of faith in the area" (p. 12).

"Instead of pouring scorn on the local school administrators, instead of family frustration leading to a move to another town, instead of raising funds for another private Christian school, these churches entered the public square and did what they could to help-and they got nothing out of it" (p. 13).

"When we move beyond belief-based faith to life-lived, holistic faith, the only true test is lives lived over time" (p. 15).

**Questions for Reflection**

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What comes to mind when you hear the word "gospel?" In your own words, how would you describe what "the gospel" is?

Why do stories affect us differently than presentations?

Many people are frustrated by the gospel because it seems to tell a story of false security in the midst of a broken reality. How does the gospel give hope without turning a blind eye to the suffering of our world?

What do you think is so significant about a church not simply raising funds to fix a building but actually doing the work themselves and inviting others into the process?

Many Christians in helping professions struggle with the idea that performing the gospel (and therefore proclaiming the gospel) is only done in the context of some kind of volunteering. In other words, how you perform the gospel has to be sacrificial in some way. Many wonder, "If it's my job to help people, does this count or do I need to be doing volunteer work as well?" What do you think about this?

## **Chapter 2-The Beginning of the Gospel**

### **Quotes to think about**

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"Most of us connect to the term Eikon. Many of us will think of icons on computer screens. When we click on them we enter another screen. Others will think of the icons in Orthodox churches or in the museums of this world. They, too, are designed by their creators to lead us into something else-in this case God" (p. 17).

"The gospel is about every one of these dimensions of human life-the human's relationship to herself and himself, to God, to others, and to the world and to the society in which we live" (p. 19).

"In seminary, Fred Rogers learned that there are two kinds of Christian leaders: accusers and advocates" (p. 20).

"C.S. Lewis's oft-quoted words may express this better than anything I've ever seen or heard: Next to the Blessed Sacrament itself, your neighbor is the holiest object presented to your senses" (p. 22).

"Individualism is the biggest obstacle to the gospel of embracing grace. Individualism tells us we are on our own, and we might be able to make it on our own. Individualism makes God and others into commodities we choose to further our own ends. Individualism diminishes who we are made to be" (p. 23).

"If humans are made to relate to God and to others, individualism attacks our very essence" (p. 24).

"We need to see ourselves as individuals, but part of a larger community through which God is working" (p. 25).

### **Questions for Reflections**

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If an icon is a symbol that points to something else, in what ways is your life pointing to God?

What other than God is your life pointing to?

How does believing that all people are made in the image of God move us from being accusers of others to being advocates for others?

How does individualism cause us to be consumers of one another? Have you ever felt used by someone else? Have you ever used someone else? What do you do when you are finished with something you have consumed? How do we do this same thing with people?

Why is being a part of a community so significant? What has it looked like in your life to be part of a community?

### **Chapter 3-The Story of the Eikon**

Quotes to think about

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"Knowing no other way to make his points clear, Tolstoy argued for his vision in regular diatribes against the demands of the flesh and private property" (p. 28).

"He died in Astapovo because he was fleeing from life with his wife at their large estate at Yasnaya Polyana" (p. 28).

"There are four chapters in the story of the Eikon. In the first chapter, which we can read at the beginning of the Bible, humans are created as Eikons of God. In the second chapter, the Eikon cracks (Genesis 3). After the creation and the cracking, the next chapter tells the story of Jesus, the perfect Eikon. The final chapter is eternity: here we see the Eikon united in love with God and others in a perfect Eden" (p. 30).

"And in the first chapter of the letter to the Hebrews, the author says that Jesus is the reflection of God's glory and the exact imprint of God's very being. The implication of Jesus' being the perfect human is enormous: God's work for us is to make us like Christ. Jesus is the perfect Eikon and the gospel is designed to transform humans into that Eikon" (p. 31).

"One such distinction is found in the first chapter of Genesis, when God says we are to have dominion over the rest of the created order. These words could suggest that being an Eikon refers to our calling to govern creation" (p. 32).

"To be like God means we are co-creators, co-relators, and co-resters" (p. 33).

"The only possible reason for such a perfect being to create the universe was to extend that love to other, imperfect beings. 'All created reality,' Edwards continued, 'is like a quintessential explosion of light from the sun of God's inter-trinitarian love.' Creation itself, in the view of Jonathan Edwards, is God's desire to extend God's own being of pulsating love into other created matter" (p. 34).

"God exists as an interpenetrating and mutual indwelling of the persons of the Trinity. In other words, God's eternal reality is the love between Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. This is what God was doing, is doing now, and will do for eternity. This is what God is. Eikons are an expression of that

reality and designed for that reality only. The gospel is designed to lead humans into that interpenetrating and mutually indwelling love of God" (p. 34).

"Anyone touched by Jesus is transformed into this loving communion, and the transformation will spread to all of our relationships" (p. 35).

"Individualism preaches non-communion and the limited value of relationships" (p. 35).

### **Questions for Reflection**

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How does the way Tolstoy views the gospel lead him to accuse others and the world? How does it lead him to advocate for others and the world?

Tolstoy died in lonely isolation because he was running from something. What are you running from?

The story of the Eikon takes a dramatic turn with Jesus, the perfect Eikon. What does being transformed into the likeness of Christ actually look like? How do you know that such a transformation is taking place in a life?

When you have been part of a group of people working on a project as co-creators, what was it like when trying to create something together became difficult?

### **Chapter 4-Cracked Eikons**

#### **Quotes to think about**

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"This generation may want a story with hope all over it, but it won't settle for a testament of hope until it hears the truth about humans" (p. 41).

"The Eikon of God cracked and its glory quickly faded. Why? Because what was designed for one purpose started to unravel. Arms that Adam and Eve previously used for an embrace were now being used to push God and others away" (p. 45).

"But, sin is more than this and deeper than this. Such a definition suggests that sin is inherently a legal issue, and when we define sin like this it becomes impersonal because law is impersonal. The reason such a textbook definition is not right enough is that it depersonalizes and de-rationalizes sin. The genius of sin is that it is first and foremost about one's relationship to God and others. Sin is a relational issue and as such transcends the legal issue" (p. 49).

"For Jesus, the Law itself is not a comprehensive collection of laws such as one finds in tax guidelines that we are expected to read and follow. No, the Ten Commandments contain specific instances of the two governing relationships in life: loving God and loving others" (p. 50).

"The implication of this teaching of Jesus for understanding sin is revolutionary: sin is clearly the breaking of a law, but more deeply it is a violation of loving God or others. In short, to continue with our image, the cracks in the Eikon are relational" (p. 50).

### **Questions for Reflection**

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What do we generally say about things that seem too good? What questions do we ask about things that seem too good?

What do you feel makes hope authentic?

How is sin like a parasite?

If humans are meant to reflect the image of an interdependent God, how does this change the line of reasoning that certain behaviors are acceptable as long as they aren't hurting anyone else?

Discuss how sin is a violation of loving God and loving others. What does that mean? What does that look like?

## **Chapter 5-The Epic of the Eikon**

### **Quotes to think about**

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"Endings explain beginnings" (p. 53).

"Worship, then, is a life lived as it is meant to be lived: for the good of others and the world" (p. 56).

"If Eternity is the perfection of our union with God and communion with others, we are on that glorious descent even now. Sometimes we snatch a glimpse of what it will be like and find ourselves transfixed into speechlessness as we stand between Now and Eternity" (p. 57).

"C.S. Lewis, in *The Great Divorce*, describes hell as a place where diminished humans are constantly in search of distance between themselves and others. Eternity, in contrast, is a place where humans will seek proximity to one another because in that proximity they come to know God and themselves" (p. 59).

"Learning about the End does not permit us to escape from the present, and if we are seeking an escape we misunderstand that End. The End is the perfected drama of what is to occur here and now. We know the end so we can live in the Now" (p. 60).

"Again, this presents an old problem. Many focus so much on heaven that life here doesn't seem to matter" (p. 62).

### **Questions for Reflection**

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How does the way you think about the End inform how you live now?

If worship is a life lived as God intended it to be lived, then what things have you worshipped in living a life as God did not intend it to be lived?

Recall and discuss a moment or experience when you caught a glimpse of life as God intended it to be.

How do you see "Thy Kingdom come on earth as it is in heaven" being lived out?

## **Chapter 6-Page after Page**

### **Quotes to think about**

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“This fundamental principle leads to the heart of the gospel: it is the work of God, in the context of a community, to restore us to union with God and communion for the good of others and the world” (p. 65).

“The gospel is designed to create community out of individualists” (p. 66).

“Wesley made a simple but potent appeal in eight words to Middleton and laid his gospel on the line with this: Come and see what Christianity has done here” (p. 69).

“At each stage of the process in this history, God is working with communities: a family tribe (Abraham), an entire nation (Moses), a kingdom (David), and a universal Church (Jesus)” (p. 71).

“Jesus’ mission was to bring the kingdom, and the kingdom is a community or a society wherein the will of God-what I call the Jesus Creed-is done. Humans are restored to God and to others, and they can be healed and sustained through pain as they are drawn into a community of faith” (p. 71).

“What most ensnared us were not references to Rilke or theology, but the community of the church” (p. 72).

### **Questions for Reflection**

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What in your experience are characteristics of community?

List some reasons why people become disillusioned with community and prefer a life of individualism.

Where do you see individualism at work in our culture? How do you see individualism at work in the church?

Consider Wesley’s response to Middleton. If you were to invite someone to come and see the gospel at work in your life, what would you point to? What has Christianity done here, in your life and community?

How are you currently participating in a community and “What is Christianity doing” in that community of people?

What significant stories or experiences stand out to you as you think about a community that you’ve been a part of?

## **Chapter 7-A Missional Gospel**

### **Quotes to think about**

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“When cracked Eikons get together they do cracked things together. Which means that humans create systemic problems, systemic violence, and systemic evil. Systemic evil describes any system or institution or governmental structure of local business policy that is contrary to God’s will and that oppresses people and creates a cycle of injustice” (p. 76).

“The gospel is designed to end systemic violence and to establish the kingdom, because the gospel is a holistic work of God” (p. 77).

“Jesus knew systemic evil from his own experience. His family fled to Egypt for fear of Jesus’ being put to death; his mother was considered an adulteress, and that means that Jesus, her son, was considered an illegitimate child, bringing some levels of ostracism for both of them” (p. 78).

“Because the tohu va-bohu has penetrated into the very fabric of society, state, and culture, the gospel is holistic. It is for every part of each person-heart, soul, mind, and strength-and it is for every part of the world-the economical, political, legal, and cultural realms” (p. 78).

“Creation, it should be observed, longs for humans to be restored to God and to others because it knows that only then will it be what God made it to be” (p. 80).

“We need to begin locally. ‘If we could think locally, we would take far better care of things than we do now. The right local questions and answers will be the right global ones’” (p. 83).

“It is a mistake to think that the only way to love people is to love people who have big problems-though I think all of us should participate in global issues as well. Genuine neighborliness listens and looks in one’s own neighborhood, beginning next door and down the street and across the street, and learns and links right there in a local context” (p. 85).

### **Questions for Reflection**

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Create a list naming as many systemic evils that you see at work in our world.

Systemic evils aren’t often overt but subtle processes entrenched over time by the participation of many people. As you look over the list you’ve created, are there any ways in which you’ve participated in the subtle process of systemic evil?

Jesus’ experience as an outcast is similar to the nation of Israel’s experience as slaves and outcasts. God reminds the Israelites throughout the Hebrew Scriptures not to forget their own slavery so that they will be compassionate to others. What have you been rescued you from that causes you to be compassionate toward others?

If the gospel is holistic and God is redeeming all things, then how is God’s redemption of your life impacting the earth?

Consider these ideas on thinking locally. A good portion of every dollar spent at a local business stays in the neighborhood rather than being shipped off to a corporation’s headquarters in a far away place. A garden can be a great way to grow local food on your own, offsetting cost and energy consumption for transportation. Local farms or farmer’s markets are great places to buy local food. Recycling is a great way to participate in caring for the earth. Composting is another way to reduce unnecessary waste.

How does an interdependent neighborhood differ from a neighborhood of individuals?

What has your experience with your neighbors been like? Do you know their names? Their needs? Why or why not?

## **Chapter 8-Stories of the Gospel Story**

### **Quotes to think about**

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"If the gospel is this big, we have to ask two mechanical questions: What does the gospel actually do for us when it restores us? And how does the restoration process actually work?" (p. 91).

"Embracing grace, so it is claimed, begins to resolve three fundamental questions...First, for the question about suffering, the gospel claims that Jesus Christ absorbs suffering and pain in his torturous death on the cross" (p. 91).

"Second, for the question of human sinfulness, the gospel claims that God-Father, Son, Spirit-graciously embraces us, and that embrace forgives us, restores us, enables us, and empowers us" (p. 92).

"And, third, for the question of a world awash in systemic evil, the gospel claims that Jesus Christ offers an alternative community: the kingdom of God" (p. 92).

"In this brief formula, that Jesus became what we are so that we might become what he is, we find everything the Church believed and will believe as it continues to explore the Atonement" (p. 95).

"The Cross is a vivid (to put it mildly) demonstration of a life of sacrifice" (p. 104).

### **Questions for Reflection**

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Read Colossians 3v7-14 and Romans 12v2

What does the process of having "taken off the old self with its practices" and "put on the new self" look like in your life?

If Jesus "absorbs suffering and pain" on the cross then why do followers of Jesus still experience suffering and pain? How is experiencing suffering and pain as a follower of Jesus different from the experience of those who aren't followers of Jesus? How is it the same?

We all carry things that we've done that we regret or we're ashamed of. The really good news is that "Jesus became what we are so that we might become what he is." If that's true, then we don't have to carry the regret and shame of the past anymore. What have you been carrying that because of Christ you don't need to carry anymore? Why is it so hard to let go?

Read Mark 8v34-36

Jesus paints a very subversive picture of people who gain the world but lose their souls. He suggests that “taking up your cross” is about giving and not taking. What does this have to do with being an “alternative community?”

How have followers of Jesus done this well? How have they done it poorly?

## **Chapter 9-The Divine Gospel Comedy**

### **Quotes to think about**

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“There are three seasons in the gospel: The Cross, the Resurrection, and Pentecost” (p. 108).

“God does his gospel work over an entire season: Good Friday, which explores and forgives the cracks in the Eikon; Easter morning, which renews and empowers us to walk again; and Pentecost, which empowers us to be a kingdom community” (p. 111).

“A person dead to God cannot come to life again merely because someone else has died in his or her place. What a dead person needs is new life. That is what the gospel promises” (p. 111).

“If the Cross deals with the cracks in the Eikon the Resurrection makes them glow with new life and hope” (p. 112).

“So, it would be more appropriate for Christians to say that Jesus came not just to die for our sins, but to die for our sins and to be raised to empower us to live as Eikons. The gospel is God’s comedy, because in the gospel death is overcome by life, and that life restores us to community for the good of the world” (p. 117).

### **Questions for Reflection**

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Seasons are powerful images of growth, great beauty and flourishing as well as desolation and desperation. Reflect on your life story and discuss a period in your life that seemed like a season. Which season was it? Why? And what marked the passing of that season?

Author Wendell Berry once wrote, “Practice Resurrection.” What do you think resurrection is and what might it look like for you to practice it in your life?

McKnight suggests that if the Cross deals with the cracks of an Eikon then the Resurrection makes those cracks glow with hope and new life. The imagery suggests that instead of the cracks being closed up that they are places from which something new grows out. Consider the cracks in your life and discuss how new life is growing from the places that were once broken.

## **Chapter 10-A Five-Foot Gospel**

### **Quotes to think about**

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“Jesus, in the Gospel of John, chapter fourteen, tells his disciples that he will be raised and return to his Father, and that he will send them the “Advocate,” (or Paraclete) the Holy Spirit” (p. 120).

“The Paraclete is Jesus’ presence in his followers; the Paraclete unites the followers of Jesus with Father, Son, and Holy Spirit; this union with God creates the possibility for his followers to love God and one another” (p. 120).

“Harriet believed that heaven was also a place on earth for those who would pray and work for that kingdom to come on earth as it was in heaven” (p. 125).

“But focusing on human sinfulness goes contrary to the grain of the Bible, which clearly sees humans as Eikons in need of restoration to be sure, but the object of God’s special love” (p. 126).

### **Questions for Reflection**

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Have you experienced moments in your life when you were able to sense Jesus’ presence with you? What was that like?

How do you actually practice being in the presence of God?

What emotions did you feel as you read the story of Harriet Tubman? Why do you think you felt those particular emotions?

McKnight goes to great lengths to say that the gospel unites *us*, and that the “us” doesn’t just mean people that are like us. How are you pursuing being united with others who aren’t like you? Do you feel that Jesus would suggest that pursuing relationship with others who aren’t like you is a priority for his followers? Why or why not?

Do you agree that focusing on human sinfulness goes contrary to the grain of the Bible? Why or Why not?

### **Chapter 11-Diminished by Exclusion**

#### **Quotes to think about**

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“Humans take one of two options in responding to the story of the gospel. The options are, as Miroslav Volf has so ably explained, exclusion or embrace” (p. 129).

“Exclusionists find identity in the pattern of exclusion. Instead of seeing themselves as like God and made for one another and part of a missional community of faith, exclusionists define themselves over against God and others to carve out some special sanctuary where they can operate sovereignly” (p. 130).

“Many of those who appear to exclude themselves from God are hiding the wounds of earlier embraces” (p. 131).

“Humans also exclude by assimilating others into their own ego, sometimes so powerfully that humans can join Cain by murdering the other. In other words, exclusion is isolation, expulsion, idolatry, libel, slavery, domination, emotional blackmail, closed-door dealing, propaganda, intentionally false information, refusal to listen to the other side, and murder” (p. 133).

“By turning inward instead of outward-toward God and others, the self-embracing ‘I’ seeks to restore what was lost in Eden by searching for it within oneself. Humans cannot be satisfied with a self-embrace; humans are made for God and others and the good of the world” (p. 135).

“What we perceive as exclusion, as for instance in the above story about Mary McCarthy or in the story about Craig’s father, sometimes masks a deeply wounded person who is still yearning to find a way to love God and others” (p. 136).

“Craig’s father could not forgive himself for what he had done. Because he couldn’t live with the shame, he excluded himself from an entire life of loving his family” (p. 137).

“That’s because we’re yearning for home, and home has nothing to do with how good the place is. It has everything to do with whether or not it is the right place. And the right place isn’t something you choose, but a place that chooses you, molds you, and tells you who you are” (p. 138).

### **Questions for Reflection**

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How do you see yourself engaging in the process of exclusion?

McKnight suggests that many choose exclusion because they’ve tried embrace and it was painful and damaging. How have you seen this to be true?

As Eikons that are cracked each of us engages in exclusion in one way or another. What things trigger you to live out of exclusion rather than embrace?

Why do you think people have such profound trouble trusting God?

How do you feel about Craig Barnes’ suggestion that “the right place isn’t something you choose, but a place that chooses you?”

### **Chapter 12-Enlivened By Embrace**

#### **Quotes to think about**

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“Father Joe, dear Father Joe! Please! Don’t do this!” (p. 141).

“The secret to unleashing the cycle of grace in our lives is to look at God and ourselves, identify who we see, and tell the truth to God” (p. 142).

“God asked Adam, ‘Where are you?’ And Adam gave an evasive answer...The proper answer would have read something like this: ‘Here I am and this is what I did’” (p. 143).

“The simplicity of the gospel is that God promises to accept us when we give ourselves to him by telling God the truth about ourselves. The Bible calls this confession” (p. 143).

“Indeed, genuine confession explores the cracks that open up into the heart of who we are and what we have done (and not done). What we find down in those cracks is a bummer indeed, but getting down into the cracks enables us to tell the truth of our story” (p. 144).

## Questions for Reflection

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In chapters three and four of Exodus Moses has a conversation with God at the burning bush. After several questions and a few excuses, Moses' final plea is simply, "Lord, please send someone else." This is shorthand for "dear God please don't do this." Why do you think Moses and Tony Hendra respond the same way? Where in your life do you see yourself saying, "God, please don't make me do this."?

Why do you suppose Adam hides and blames someone else instead of coming clean? Can you identify the process of hiding and blaming in your own brokenness?

What do you think about the practice of confession?

Pray the Litany of Penitence (p. 145-149).

## Chapter 13-Dancing Grace

### Quotes to think about

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"A genuine embrace is a bodily thing" (p. 153).

"Missional faith asserts that Jesus came to preach the good news of the kingdom of God to everyone, especially to the poor. He came to seek and save the lost. He came on behalf of the sick. He came to save the world. His gospel, and therefore the Christian message, is Good News for the whole world. I think the missional way is better [than the old model of separating evangelism and social action]: the gospel brings blessings to all, adherents and nonadherents alike" (p. 157).

"Your world is yours, and you are invited to enter into the redemption of your world in your ways. We do this by listening, looking, learning, and linking-in our world, in our way, for our time" (p. 157).

"God's goal for the world is the kingdom of God, and Jesus formed the Church to be a catalyst for that kingdom" (p. 159).

"Some see church attendance as a form of entertainment-some place they go, some actions they observe, some people they watch, followed by some food at a restaurant, and then home they go. Embracing a faith community means becoming a community participant, and that means accepting something very important and noticeable: being the person to the community that we are meant to be" (p. 160).

"The apostle Paul calls this 'spiritual gifts' in several of his letters, but whatever we want to call it we are to participate by performing what we have been gifted to do" (p. 160).

"It also means trust and tolerance-loving others for who they are, where they are in their journey, and what they might become. Too often, far too often, churches make people aware at the visceral level of 'who is in' and 'who is out'" (p. 160).

## Questions for Reflection

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As you think about Christianity, what are the dangers of viewing belief and action as two different expressions rather than one and the same?

How do you discern or decide what God asks you to participate in?

What do you think have you been gifted to do that you can contribute as a participant in God's kingdom?

Can you give an example of having been loved by a group of people for who you are and where you are in your journey?

How do groups and churches sometimes communicate "who's in" and "who's out?"

What can you do as an individual, group, or church to love people for who they are right where they are at in their journey?

## **Chapter 14-A Family of Embracing Grace**

### **Quotes to think about**

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"Some fear that messy stories will glorify a messy faith. For my part, I am more afraid of a gospel that does not permit us to tell the messy story of an authentic faith" (p. 166).

"The difference between those three early episodes in his life and the letter he wrote much later is dramatic. It is the story of a growing love, of the conversion of a total person to a holistic gospel" (p. 167).

"Jesus' kingdom is a radical reorientation of society because it does not care about difference. It cares about the mission to restore" (p. 171).

"The kingdom would look like this: all will be included; poverty will end; oppressive powers will be leveled; the imprisoned will discover a door that leads to freedom; the physically challenged will wake up with new gifts; and the Lord's favor will skip and dance through the land" (p. 171).

### **Questions for Reflection**

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Why is telling the messiness of your story so important?

Over the course of many years, something in the Apostle John's life changed his attitude toward others. What do you think happened?

What sorts of experiences over time tend to make people more compassionate? What sorts of experiences have made you more compassionate? Why?

As you discover your role in the bringing of God's kingdom, can you look at McKnight's list of what the kingdom looks like and draw connections to how those things are happening in and through your life?

What do you find significant about Karen's interaction with Frank on page 174?

Would you still find their interaction powerful if Frank had responded differently?