



FALLING IN LOVE WITH  
**JESUS**  
(AGAIN)

A MANUAL FOR CHURCHES  
SEEKING TO RECLAIM THEIR  
FIRST LOVE

DAVID JACKSON

# ENDORSEMENTS

*In today's North American church world, where communication science, behavior modification, leadership development, and strategic initiatives often dominate, pastors and church leaders can easily overlook the fundamental matter of greatest importance: loving Jesus. The Replant Team has masterfully developed a tool that is both simple and profound, carefully crafted for the believer and the church to walk a journey to a place of falling in love, again, with their first love. Pastor, when your church is truly in love with Jesus, everything else begins to fall into place.*

**Eric W. Ramsey**, Executive Director and Treasurer  
West Virginia Convention of Southern Baptists

*Those of us who minister amongst declining or dying churches are often asked about “the key” to church revitalization and renewal. To be sure, gospel-centric preaching, sound doctrine, missiology, ecclesiology, evangelism, and strategic ministry practices are essential. Yet churches can have or regain all of these in some measure and yet remain lifeless, void of any true spiritual vitality! In Falling in Love with Jesus (Again) the Replant Team at NAMB reminds us that we are individually and corporately being called back to our first love, Jesus. They wisely lay out a practical roadmap to help local churches evaluate their love life with Jesus as they're called to remember, repent, and renew that relationship. Our local team can't wait to use this material full of practical strategies to encourage and equip our churches as we seek to call them (and ourselves) back to our first love.*

**Christopher Cole**, ReNew Catalyst  
Great Commission Association, California

*The concept of church revitalization has gained significant attention in many evangelical circles, given the declining vitality of the North American church. However, renewed vitality will not be found in pragmatism alone, nor is revitalization solely about adopting healthy practices and processes for the church to adhere to. The issue of revitalization ultimately stems from the heart. Falling in Love with Jesus (Again) excels in guiding participants to accurately identify the underlying problem of waning fervor for Jesus and offers a scriptural approach to rekindling their vitality. The content covered in this training manual is indispensable for those dedicated to church revitalization.*

**William W. Cofield**, Senior Pastor at Central Baptist Church,  
York, South Carolina, and Revitalization Strategist at York Baptist  
Association

*The Replant Team has put together a resource that can help any church that is serious about revitalization get back on track: a roadmap for reviving our love for Jesus. While there are wonderful materials out there that are designed to help churches re-vision and re-tool for greater engagement in disciple-making, without a vibrant relationship with the Great Disciple-Maker Himself, we will remain powerless and ineffective. These biblically infused, experientially guided lessons remind us that all that we do and are begins with our Savior.*

**Walker Armstrong**, Former Executive Director of the Triad  
Church Network, North Carolina, and current AMS Liaison with the  
Replant Team, North American Mission Board

# **FALLING IN LOVE WITH JESUS (AGAIN)**

**DAVID JACKSON**



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# FOREWORD

The vast majority of churches today need revitalization. Many of them are looking in all the wrong places. They're looking to conferences, books, or individuals as the starting point for change. However, none of these places is where revitalization truly begins.

I recall a conversation with Henry Blackaby many years ago. Henry related how a pastor told him that nothing worked in their church. They had tried everything for revitalization: conferences, books, seminars, events, programs, and, still, nothing worked. Henry responded, "That's because nothing ever does work." He continued, "The only thing that works is what Jesus wants you to do. He has a plan for every church, and He has a plan for your church. Your job is to discover what Jesus' plan is for your church."

After 40 years of administration, I can completely agree with my brother, Henry Blackaby. Perhaps a conference, a book, or a leader is what God wants to use to help revitalize your church. However, revitalization does not start with that person, that book, or that conference. It begins with discovering what Jesus wants for your church. And that is the purpose of this book: to help your church by first looking to Jesus and understanding what He desires to do with your church. As the writer points out in this manual, "Revitalization begins with a relationship with our Savior."

I highly recommend this manual to you. It will be helpful to every church and every church leader. It is our sincere prayer that this tool will guide you to discern what Jesus wants to accomplish in His church. Because that's ultimately the bottom line: This church belongs to Him. It is His bride. He bought it with His blood. He loves it more than you love it, and He still has a plan for it.

The Replant Team offers this manual to you out of their commitment, passion, and personal walks with Christ. They understand revitalization begins with a renewed relationship with Christ. I'm grateful that this resource is available for such a time as this.

**Mark Clifton**

Executive Director of the Revitalization/Replant/Rural Ministry  
North American Mission Board



Write to the angel of the church in Ephesus:

Thus says the one who holds the seven stars in his right hand and who walks among the seven golden lampstands:

I know your works, your labor, and your endurance, and that you cannot tolerate evil people. You have tested those who call themselves apostles and are not, and you have found them to be liars. I know that you have persevered and endured hardships for the sake of my name, and you have not grown weary. But I have this against you: You have abandoned the love you had at first. Remember then how far you have fallen; repent, and do the works you did at first. Otherwise, I will come to you and remove your lampstand from its place, unless you repent. Yet you do have this: You hate the practices of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate.

Let anyone who has ears to hear listen to what the Spirit says to the churches. To the one who conquers, I will give the right to eat from the tree of life, which is in the paradise of God.

### **Revelation 2:1-7**



## INTRODUCTION

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Much of this past year, I had the privilege of working with Claude King, coauthor of *Experiencing God* and *Fresh Encounter*, on a renewal project for churches. The need was borne from observing many struggling churches who recognized their need but were unable to renew. There are many reasons for this. However, one stood out for us: There are many churches whose hearts have become hard, brittle, and calloused. They don't want renewal, nor do they desire to reach their community. They like things just the way they are, even if it kills them.

Eventually, their demise will occur unless they return to their first love, Jesus Christ. This return is difficult because they don't fully understand they have abandoned Him. Like the church of Ephesus, they've replaced Him with pale substitutes of their own making. This departure from the Lord is often subtle and typically happens over a long period of time. Such idols might include people, programs, or preferences. Whatever they may be, the result is that there is no visible evidence of a church ablaze for the glory of God.

The question we determined to tackle was this: How do we lead a church to fall in love with Jesus again? If there is a "silver bullet" in the work of revitalization and replanting, it is this. However, it may not show its impact in what we traditionally consider metrics of value: attendance, giving, or facilities. Rather, it will be evident in the deep, rich, meaningful relationships the church has with God (vertical), as well as inside the church with one another; outside the church in the community, and with the world (horizontal). In doing so, let me suggest the following:

Follow Jesus' own strategy in Revelation 2:1-7.

**First, renewal begins in you.** Most of you who are reading this are pastors or key leaders in the church where you serve. May I just say to you: First of all, thank you for your perseverance in a challenging time and place. Your ongoing commitment to the work of the Lord there speaks volumes about the character of your life. Second, may I remind you: “As the leaders go, so goes the church.” In other words, before you can see the church renewed, you must be renewed or in a continual state of renewal. This “mirror effect” is seen in the life of the congregation after a pastor has been there for about seven years. If your tenure is shorter than that, the congregation is largely reflecting the image and lifestyle of your predecessor. Don’t lose heart! Perseverance will win the day if you stay close to God and cultivate your relationship with Him.

**Second, help them remember where they previously were.** Do you recall the thrill of your new relationship with Christ? I do. I recall the “cleanness” of my heart, the eagerness to tell someone else what had happened, as well as the happiness evidenced on my face. These were only some of the ways my newfound faith in Christ impacted my life as a new believer. New churches were like this, too. But over time, these experiences tend to fade. Thom Rainer taught us that the “drip effect” of erosion affects our churches. (It is so slow that we hardly notice it until much time has passed.) Little by little, we forget the passion, the joy, the celebration, and the excitement we had for Jesus in the early days of the church. We must help our churches recapture this fervor by reminding them of these personal experiences they had with Christ in the past. We also help them realize God’s faithfulness and leadership made it all possible then and that He can do it again for them now.

***As the leaders  
go, so goes the  
church.***

**Third, repentance is not optional.** This command is so essential that Jesus repeats it twice in this short passage. Help them realize it is God’s faithfulness and leadership that makes all this possible and that He can use the church all over again. However, if we are not growing in our love for Jesus, then we are headed in the wrong direction! We must confess our neglect, turn around, and run back into His loving arms. While we don’t often think of abandoning our love for God as a terrible sin, it is an affront to God and a violation of what He teaches as the Greatest Command: to love God with all our being. Until we repent as a congregation, we are allowing the abandonment of our first love

for God to be a barrier between us and Him. Our only option is to confront and deal with our sin. Otherwise, we are falling short of God's command and desire.

**Fourth, this is why we must lead the church to return to what they did before.** Don't just do "anything"; rather, He says to do the most important things as you did in the early days. Many of us are good at staying busy. However, Jesus says this is not what is needed. In fact, it can be counter-productive (see Luke 6:45-46). Rather, do what you did at first, He says. Jesus is not suggesting we go back to the good old days or revive old traditions. He's talking about the founding vision He gave all churches: to supremely love God, to sacrificially love each other, and to generously love the world by sharing the good news of Jesus and helping new disciples follow Him.

You see, the silver bullet is this: Love God with all your heart, mind, soul, and strength, and love your neighbor as yourself. It's time to get back to our primary love. It's time to refocus our hearts on Jesus.

This manual is designed to assist you do this very thing: help your church return to the foundations of loving Jesus with greater passion and engaging in His mission with deeper joy. So, with this goal in mind, let's prayerfully begin making this mission a new reality for the church where you serve Him.





## START HERE

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We were a year and a half into our first church planting effort on the East Coast. It had been a struggle, to say the least. While God had most obviously called us to church planting and led us there, we had run into obstacles at virtually every turn. Even the first person we met while filling up the moving van at the gas station told us, “Go back!” when he heard we had moved all the way from the West to plant a new church.

And the difficulties just grew worse over time. From almost being kicked out of our apartment for inviting people to our first Bible study to being told we couldn’t use any city building for worship services, we were discouraged and despondent.

Then, there were the people. Our partnering church sent us three families to help in the first year, but many of the others were misfits and marginalized folks. It was a challenging group for us, young in our ministry and trying to acclimate to the culture and rhythms of a unique place that was different from the experiences of our past.

One night in prayer, I was overwhelmed with frustration and discouragement. After a year of worshiping at an abandoned church building in the southern part of our city, I complained to the Lord, “God, why did You bring us all the way across the country for this? This is so difficult and hard, yet, I am absolutely convinced You told me You wanted to do a great work through us. So, why Lord? Why?”

As clear as day, God responded, “My son, I can’t do a great work through you until I do a great work in you.”

I tell you this story today, knowing that few of us reading this material are church planters, like I was at the time. But I am also aware that many of us are discouraged and frustrated, struggling in a difficult and hard place, with no rational reason why.

Perhaps God needs to do something in you first.

May I suggest that when dealing with hard-hearted churches that need to recover an abandoned love for Jesus, you start here, with your own heart? Perhaps your own heart has to be rekindled and refreshed with a passionate love for God before anyone else. Perhaps you need to fall in love with Jesus again yourself.

Now, I'm not suggesting this is the only, or even the primary reason, the church is struggling in its love for Jesus. There are many other possible reasons, which we will explore in the pages ahead.

However, I am suggesting that this is a significant starting point for all churches, where the pastor recognizes that he is personally struggling with his own heart of love toward Jesus.

***Perhaps God  
needs to do  
something in  
you first.***

Have you ever thought hard about the apostle Paul's words to the Corinthians, "Imitate me, as I also imitate Christ" (1 Corinthians 11:1)? In my earlier years, I used to write it off, as though an arrogant braggard were making a boasting claim about the superiority of his spiritual life in Christ. As I've aged, I have come to realize two very important things about this verse. First, in making this statement, Paul recognizes the reality that while you teach what you know, you will reproduce who you are. He understands the role of modeling and the power of example in the lives of others. What they see, they can put into action. Where they participate, their life is changed.

Second, he also realizes he is making himself accountable to them for his own growth and development. If he's not living as he should, they are invited to critique. In actuality, he is demonstrating humility and showing submission to those he serves. This, rather than being a sign of his arrogance, is a demonstration of his maturity in Christ and the responsibility it entails for those he influenced.

As such, the best thing we can do for those we influence—our families, younger leaders, and the church where we serve—is make sure our own relationship with Christ is love-filled, vibrant, and growing.

In 1962, when the first-time world champion Green Bay Packers returned for preseason training to prep for the new season ahead, Coach Vince Lombardi famously said, “Gentlemen, this is a football.” That statement was a reminder to them that we never outgrow our need for the basics. For us as Christians, the right foundation is critically necessary to live the life we should as followers of Christ. These basics form the basis of our relationship with God, and if done with desire, they will enhance our love for Christ. They will draw us closer to Him. We call these basics “spiritual disciplines,” in large part because it takes discipline to form and mindfully develop the habits necessary to pursue these relational aspects in our walk of following Christ.

By the way, I’m sure you’ve noticed that “disciple” and “discipline” both come from the same root word. While a disciple is a follower or pupil, discipline is the process or habits necessary to follow and learn as we should. It keeps us from getting lazy or off track; instead, we make forward progress within the boundaries of a growing, healthy relationship with Jesus.

What are these disciplines we need to grow in our love, passion, and devotion for Jesus? While this is no attempt to comprehensively cover all the spiritual disciplines that could be influential in keeping our hearts soft and tender in our own relationships with Jesus, the following, at the very least, need to be emphasized.

## PRAYER

Matthew Henry is quoted as having once said, “A praying man will stop sinning, and a sinning man will stop praying.” Henry’s comment underscores the necessity of a clean heart before God. The relational nature of discipleship requires this. A reconciled heart keeps us listening

***“A praying man will stop sinning, and a sinning man will stop praying.”***

hearing, and responding in obedience to what God shares. His wooing and wisdom instill confidence and trust, enabling us to move forward in our walks with Him as unhindered and secure followers. Confession and thanksgiving are key elements in the kind of prayer needed; an openness and honesty in our walk with God positions us to be available and eager to hear God’s voice and then able to respond with joy and expectancy.



## **THE WORD**

Spending more and better time feeding upon God's Word will nourish the soul. The Spirit brings its truth to life in our hearts and quickens us to realize and apply its truths personally. It is personal, effective, and motivating. However, we must always remember, as D. L. Moody once said, "The Bible exists not primarily for information, but for our transformation." So, we approach its pages with anticipation that God is going to use it to reprove, rebuke, and exhort, equipping us for every good work (see 2 Timothy 3:16-17). It conforms us more and more into the image of His Son. Our heart and love for God grow as we come to know Him better.

## **WORSHIP**

The ultimate gift we can offer God is our worship. He is worth it! We live to glorify and exalt Him. Nothing does more for our heart than this. Our worship is certainly more than what we do on Sunday mornings. We live lives of worship every moment of every day. Thus, we are to submit all our decisions, our relationships, and our service to Him; in so doing, we act and behave out of our devotion, love, and commitment. Worship reminds us that it is all about Him. So, when we gather with other believers on the weekend—and we should!—we are seeking to do two primary things: offer our love and devotion back to God our Maker and provoke one another to love and good works. Both of these things soften our hearts and reorientate us to God as our Center, our Anchor.

## **REST**

This is truly a needed discipline for most of us in ministry. According to the Scripture, it is not optional. Our very beings need rest. The refreshment and renewal that rest offers us only serves to make us more aware of our world and those in it; conversely, when we fail to get the rest we need, our mind and body wear out and are beaten down. Our relationships suffer. Our awareness of the world and our ability to be attuned to the voice of God are also impaired. We must acknowledge our need for this discipline, as well as God's wisdom in requiring it for our well-being. Our application of rest demonstrates our willing obedience to His desires.

## **OUTWARD DISCIPLINES (SERVICE, GENEROSITY, FORGIVENESS)**

I have lumped these together, simply because they are evidenced in our horizontal relationships in life. Living for God on behalf of others requires we be servant-hearted, generous, and forgiving as we model Christlike life and love to those around us. Giving and forgiving will warm your heart like few other things can and will enable you to grow in love as you exemplify God's love in action. He offers us the opportunity to join Him in His work of reconciliation.

## **WITNESS**

Sharing the gospel with others, in speech and in action, is a great indicator of our passion and enthusiasm for Jesus. This notion was true of almost all of us when we first became followers of Christ. Evangelism has a way of rekindling and reinvigorating our walk with Christ as we continue doing it. Why? Likely, it is because we must recognize and rely on the Spirit's presence within us, drawing us closer to Christ, even as we declare His love and good news to others. Nothing will excite you more, and perhaps even satisfy your soul, than celebrating the newfound faith of those you witnessed to as they embrace the love of Christ for themselves.

For most, if not all, of us, these are simply reminders of truths we have known for many years. In different seasons of our lives, we have become passionate about these disciplines and have engaged them enthusiastically. As a result, we have grown in our faith and love for Jesus.

But over time, if we are not careful, our motivations shift from gratitude and joy at the eager opportunity to continually meet with God to a dutiful, obligation-bound routine that is joyless and, can I say, boring. We have felt dry, distant, and disengaged from the passion we once knew. We know something is missing, but we hurry to "do life" and miss out on the intimacy of the time and precious moments we have to share with our Maker. Soon, if we are not careful, our times become sporadic and distant, our hearts becoming cold and brittle. By this time, we are typically aware that our relationship with God is "not right" or certainly not where it once was. We have allowed other things to crowd out the love, faith, and passion we previously felt for Jesus.

When this reality sets in, we need to find renewal for our souls. We need nothing more than to slow down and reconnect with our God. As we've noted before, it starts at the heart level, not the activity level. We have to hunger and thirst after God, as it is written in Psalm 42:1: "As the deer longs for flowing streams, so I long for You, God."

Renewal is what we need; it's what God desires for us all.

Because of this reality, Jesus' letter to the church in Ephesus serves as a cautionary tale for us all today. We must be careful to guard our hearts and keep them fixed on Jesus as our first and primary love. For more on this, turn to the next chapter.

## **QUESTIONS FOR CONSIDERATION**

1. On a scale from 1-10, how do you see your love for God today? Where would you have put it at the beginning of your relationship with Him? What has changed?
2. What is the “great work” God is doing in your heart and life today? What lessons have you learned about God? What lessons have you learned about yourself? How have these lessons impacted your love for Him?
3. Where in your spiritual disciplines are you growing most in your love for God? Where are you growing the least? Why do you think this?
4. What are your motivations in your service for God? How are these motivations feeding or starving your love for Jesus?





## RECLAIMING THE LOVE WE LEFT BEHIND

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Have you ever been unfaithful to your spouse?

I suspect I have your attention.

In Revelation 2:4, the church of Ephesus is confronted by Jesus in rather stark and direct words: You have “abandoned” (or “left”) your first love. The harshness of the action verb used suggests a stronger picture, though. The verb, ἀφῆμι (apheami), connotes the idea of infidelity or unfaithfulness in their relationship with Christ. In other words, they love someone or something else more than Jesus; this is akin to spiritual adultery.

At the very least, it declares abandonment, which is another reason found in the New Testament as grounds for biblical divorce.

Yet Jesus confronts His church, not out of a desire for a divorce, but rather out of His love for her. He is calling on her to reclaim the love for Him that she has left behind.

This statement alludes to the picture painted in the Old Testament of Israel’s relationship with God and how they abandoned Him for idols and foreign gods. This is especially grievous because of the covenant relationship Israel had with God. They gave allegiance to lesser gods rather than following the one true God who delivered them from slavery and richly provided for them.

Most people think we don’t practice any kind of idolatry today. But the signs of a wandering heart and a wayward eye are seen when we exchange the delights of knowing God with the temporal pleasures of

this world. This doesn't mean that God hates pleasure. He invented it! Rather, it means that when we make the pursuit of pleasure our primary objective in life we have created an idol. Another sign of idolatry in our lives occurs when we want to be our own god. We think we know what is best and that we really don't need God's guidance and help.

**Idolatry is unfaithfulness to Christ.** Unfaithfulness in any relationship always results in disastrous consequences. It disrupts relationship, creating a need for reconciliation and forgiveness. It severs intimacy, requiring forgiveness and reconciliation. It fractures trust, halting the ability to grow further in relationship. It shatters believability when a person says one thing yet does another.

There are other more subtle consequences, as well. Idolatry promotes pride and selfish ambition. It renounces dependency and exalts autonomy. It deceives self into settling for less than the best, for something simpler, easier, or more satisfying (at the time). It brings guilt, as well as shame, for us and for those we love. It roadblocks fruitfulness.

When churches abandon their primary love for Jesus, their idolatry will result in many of these same consequences too.

They may go through the motions of church, but their passion will be gone, because their commitment will be broken. These churches have settled for far less than what God desires and knows they need.

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## **ACCEPT NO SUBSTITUTES**

No matter how good, attractive, or even well-intentioned these alternatives may be, they pale in comparison to Jesus Christ. He is the only One who deserves our primary love. He is the only One who requires our unrequited devotion.

To reclaim this love—to fall in love with Jesus again—we must remember, repent, and renew our relationship with Him. The material in this manual is an attempt to help your church move through these

steps in rekindling their relationship with Him. It is an attempt to lead your people to refresh their walk with Christ and to restore Him to the primary place of love in their collective hearts.

## **REMEMBER**

Jesus reminds the church at Ephesus on the depth of their departure from the primacy of His love (2:5). He clearly indicates that by remembering (thinking about, pondering, and reflecting) on this reality, they will come to the same conclusion. Has there ever been a time in your life when you were more excited, more passionate about Jesus than you are now? If so, why do you think this is? Jesus challenges the church to reflect on something similar in order to sober them up, so to speak, and to come to grips with the reality that some things have changed and that they are not where they once were.

This is not to say that God is solely interested in an emotional response. Quite the contrary! We are to love Him with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength, meaning the totality of our being. But the inclusivity of our love does not eliminate our passion and emotions from experiencing and demonstrating this love for our Lord.

Remembering is the first step Jesus indicates the church must make if they are to reclaim their abandoned love for Him. The implication is that Jesus wants them to return to that place from which their hearts have fallen and to move forward with Him from there. They need to recapture what was so exciting, so vibrant about the relationship then and perhaps what has robbed them of this intimacy in the time since.

## **REPENT**

The return of the church to a primary love for Jesus requires repentance. This word, literally meaning a “change of mind,” indicates that the direction they are currently headed is away from the heart of Jesus. This changing of their minds is expected to bring about a change in direction, so that they move back in alignment with God and His agenda, desires, and heart. It requires the intellectual agreement they are in fact headed in the wrong direction and then the correctives necessary to move back into sync with Him. The church would benefit from recalling the past and considering where they previously were in their walk with God.



Repentance is foundationally a spiritual endeavor and requires us to acknowledge the lordship and direction of Christ over our lives and over His church. In many ways, our own agendas with guidelines, rules, and instructions are easier to maneuver and to control than simply following Jesus and growing in our love and devotion to Him. Though we can tick certain things off a list, a growing, deeper relationship is hard to measure, so believers often look for clearer substitutes. It is not the intention of most followers of Christ—perhaps even the intention of the church at Ephesus—to be overtly rebellious. The situation in our church may be similar to theirs. However, we can easily adopt a “Martha perspective” in our walk with Christ over a “Mary perspective” (see Luke 10:38-42). And it may be that over time, the Martha “doing” actually replaces the Mary “being” with Jesus ... a direction gone too far.

## RENEW

The final piece of the prescription given by Jesus to the church is to do the works you did at first. A renewal of the former, foundational elements in the church’s early life is essential to walking with Jesus as we should. Please notice that He wants us to *do*. Activity and service are a part of our discipleship and walk with Christ. We must simply do the right things, and in this instance, He says, the “works you did at first” (Ephesians 2:5). Obviously, this is directed at the church, as a whole, so we need to remember that as we process what He means. As a former church planter, I am aware that new churches, like Ephesus had been in years past, start in a similar fashion. They build relationships with God and others. They witness to others about Christ. If and when they commit to following Him, they seek to help disciple others. Worship flows out of all of these works, and it flows out of all of our lives, in general.

These elements seem to be foundational to a church’s work for Christ and likewise serve as a reminder to the church from Jesus. And do they not help us live out the Great Commandment He gave us: loving the Lord our God (through prayer, discipleship, and worship) and others (relationships in service and witness, as well as corporate worship)? These are essential for the body to live out its life for Christ, its head. I’m not going to suggest the church at Ephesus was deficient in one or more of these elements, though I wonder if they were failing to see the value in them as they once did. Or perhaps, like many of our churches today, they had begun to program and add policies to their spiritual disciplines

and activities. Over time, we can forget why we actually do what we do. We may substitute efficiency for true effectiveness.

As a result, our focus shifts from loving God and being on mission with Him to growing and maintaining programs, budgets, and buildings. This shift does not happen overnight. But after a while, the church becomes so inward-focused that the adventure of following Jesus is replaced with making sure everything is in order and looking good.

Our motivation seems to be crucial. Otherwise, we may lose our first love.

*“Let anyone who has ears to hear listen to what the Spirit says to the churches.”*





# FIRST LOVE

## AND WHY IT IS SO IMPORTANT

---

Falling in love changed everything for me.

When I was first introduced to my future wife, I was initially resistant. After all, others were trying to match us up, and I was too proud and independent to admit I needed help finding love. My ego and ambition got in the way. My heart emphatically wanted to do things my own way and resisted the attempts of others to lead me toward love.

Then, it suddenly happened! One day, while our group of young adults was discussing a biblical topic, she asked me in front of everyone what my thoughts were. Embarrassed and awkward, I feigned a response, but the thaw on my heart had already begun.

Less than a year later, romance had bloomed, and we stood in front many of those same people, declaring a love that would last forever. Now, over thirty-nine years later, we are still going strong.

Has it always been easy? No. Has every day been a bed of roses scented with perfume? Of course not. The feeling of love has waxed and waned over the years, but that has been due to the self-imposed obstacles of my own doing. Forgiveness and celebration have renewed our passion and matured our love over the years. As our intimacy and commitment have deepened, our joy and gratitude have grown.

In a wondrous way, the love from the heart of my wife has pursued me (hounded me, even, at times!) and refused to let me go. Distractions and hindrances threaten it and attempt to harden my heart from time to time. However, my awareness of that pursuing love, and my need for it, has drawn me back over and over again.

In a rather small and finite way, this love mirrors God's love for us. Though aware of it, we often feign indifference or find ways to impose our own will and independence in an effort to distance ourselves from Him. We live in the illusion and desire for control. But His love, as it pursues us and becomes evident to us, quickens our hearts and brings us to life, as it were, for the very first time.

His love changes everything. We see the world differently. We notice things we had not noticed before and feel things we hadn't realize were even possible. We see beauty and enjoy life in a new way; we find meaning where we had not seen it before. We look forward to another day and every fresh, new encounter with He who loves us so.

Let's look at the process and then at its resolution.

## **GOD PURSUES US**

The Bible is filled with references, from the Old Testament to the New, of God's love for His people. "I have loved you with an everlasting love," God says to His people (Jeremiah 31:3). This people was largely exiled, with remnants left behind; still, the message was a reminder that God's love does not stop. He faithfully pursues us, even when we are rebellious and wicked. He pursues us in spite of our sin. We see this idea as the apostle Paul writes, "But God proves his own love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us" (Romans 5:8). His pursuit shows us His unfailing love because "God is love" (1 John 4:8). Loving us is His nature. Through His pursuit of us, He woos us, nurtures us, and even disciplines us. He does not abandon or forsake us because He loves us so.

## **GOD SHARES HIS LOVE WITH US**

Not only do we experience God's love personally (see John 3:16), but when we become His children, we are conformed more and more to the image of His Son, who loved us and gave His life for us (see Galatians 2:20). Thus, "we love because he first loved us" (1 John 4:19). And because our heart is to reflect His heart and our character reflects His character, we are called to "love one another," as many as nine times in the New Testament. In fact, Jesus says, "By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another" (John 13:35).

This is not arbitrary or incidental; it is at the core of who we are in relationship to God and within His family. We are to mirror Him in our dealings with others. We are to love our neighbors, as ourselves (see Matthew 22:39).

## **GOD CALLS UPON US TO LOVE HIM BEST**

But our primary love is to be shown to God Himself. Nothing else is to rival our allegiance or our affection for Him. This commandment was taught early to God's people, as they prepared to enter the Promised Land (see Deuteronomy 6:5) and was so significant that it has become known as the Greatest Commandment of all in the Old Testament. Jesus Himself confirmed it to be the greatest of all the 613 commands of the Old Testament (see Matthew 22:37-38), solidifying its significance for all His followers. The author James notes this "royal law" is a law of love (James 2:8). Love must be lived out; it must be visible in tangible ways. James goes on to acknowledge our behavior as an indicator of the legitimacy of our stated love for God. It is seen in the primacy of our behavior that reveals the character of God maturing within us.

## **THE NATURE OF HIS LOVE**

This love that God calls forth from within us is "αγάπη (agape) love," according to Revelation 2:4, the verse which prompts our discussion in this manual. It is well-documented that there are four kinds of love in the Greek language: ερος (eros), στεργια (stergia), φιλεω (phileo), and αγαπη (agape). Of these four, the one consistently used to describe God's love is αγαπη (agape). This love is known to be sacrificial, unselfish, and filled with commitment and action on behalf of others. It prompts service toward others and yields a passion to enable others to experience the fullness of life, including their potential, in allegiance and connectedness with their Creator. It is the kind of love God shares and demonstrates toward us; this is the kind of love God commands us to have toward Him and toward one another. Our love reflects His love back to Him.

The closest love to God that we share in this world is our marital love. Here we are to be unselfish and sacrificial toward our spouse. Here we are to put his or her well-being and needs above our own. Here we commit to demonstrate our devotion, our affection, and our fidelity to our spouse above that of any other on earth. It is provoked by an eager

desire to be in the presence of the one we love, to bask in his or her affections, and to experience the wonder of this precious, one-of-a-kind relationship.

## THE RESOLUTION OF HIS LOVE

When we love God as we should, with our primary devotion and faithfulness to Him, it will evidence many of the same desires and results. We will be eager to come into His presence. We will desire to spend time with Him. We will prioritize His concerns above all else, and we will seek to please Him more than any other. This love will overflow into our relationships with others, enabling us to love them as we should.

How does this work? Let me illustrate it again from personal example.

Joye and I are nearing our 40th wedding anniversary, and we are happily and devotedly married to one another. We have learned that we are “one” and thus, living, loving, and serving together is better for us than doing things on our own. We have had to learn this lesson over time; our selfish inclinations have made it easier at times to demand or to want our own way. Our desire for control has caused each other to be neglected or hurt. And while we have never been unfaithful in practice to one another, there have been times when our hearts have been distant and distracted.

At these moments, one or both of us must courageously step up and call the other one out. And a decision must be made at that point: a decision to repent (change our mind) and bring our behavior back in line with what God wants and with what is needed in a loving, devoted relationship. So, we work at rekindling the romance between us.

We carve out time to spend together; we make precious memories that bind our hearts more tightly to one another. We speak each other’s love language to show our passion and devotion to each other. We recall the things that brought us together as well as God’s amazing plan to orchestrate our lives and love.

***Our love  
reflects His  
love back  
to Him.***

Is this easy? Not really, if I’m being honest. It would be easier to do my own thing, my own way, all the time. But there is a problem with that: Marriage is a relationship. And doing my own thing my own way

creates a dissonance that distracts one of us or diverts us into something less than what is best for us both. This selfishness keeps us from moving in the same direction together and thus slows our progress. It may even offer a competing agenda or concern that must be addressed.

Marriage is hard work. But it's for the best because God created and designed us for each other, to live life as one before Him and the world. (Remember those wedding vows?)

The Bible tells us the church is the bride of Christ. As such we are "married" to Him. He is our primary love, and our life is one with Him. When our relationship is right before Him, we flourish, and the world sees the beautiful creation God has made. When it is anything less, we feel the distance, and the world misses the wonder of what God has done.

## **QUESTIONS FOR CONSIDERATION**

1. How has God pursued you? What distractions can get in the way? How do you handle those distractions?
2. How have you responded to His love? In what ways do you show your love to Christ and for Christ?
3. How do you stoke the fire of your love for Christ? What will you do today to make it deeper and better than before?







## OBSTACLES TO RENEWAL

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So, when we don't love God as we should, our hearts replace devotion and faithfulness with duty and obligation. Our hearts begin to harden and resist His affections in favor of our own interests and pursuits. And while we may still continue in our love and fidelity, it is distant and without passion. We have replaced our primary love for God with a lesser god, an alternative that now rivals our devotion to and interest in God Himself. This is idolatry, a grievous sin to God, and a threat, not only to our well-being in relationship to Him, but also to our service for Him. In fact, it could be argued from Scripture that we cannot love others as we should without our primary love extending to God Himself.

For churches, this idolatry can be a fatal flaw. It can lead to numerous dangerous consequences.

### **REPLACING GOD'S AGENDA WITH OUR OWN AGENDA**

Churches show their love for self over God by seeking the things they desire rather than the desires of God's heart. These items often devolve into preference items rather than concerns of substance. God's people forget the purpose for which He founded His church and settle for missions apart from that of Christ. We get caught up in trivial pursuits rather than the redemptive purpose of God.

### **NEGLECTING GOD'S VIEW OF SUCCESS FOR OUR OWN**

Closely akin to the previous consequence, we humans in the post-church growth era can be prisoners of certain metrics. These metrics are often

numerical and usually include membership or attendance, finances, and buildings or acreage. Hopefully, they will also include conversions and baptisms, some way to record commitments made for Christ. While every person is important to God and every dollar needs to be stewarded well, it is still possible that these metrics can represent interests that diverge or supersede the metrics of “first love.” What might these be? “Do you love me more than these?” (John 21:15) and “If anyone wants to follow Me, let him deny himself, take up his cross daily, and follow Me” (Luke 9:23) come to mind, and such devotion is much harder to measure.

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## **INTERPERSONAL CONFLICT**

When churches don't love God as they should, they don't value others as they should. There is a breakdown in the subsequent command to love our neighbors as ourselves. In church life, this means we often see others as rivals or competitors, rather than siblings and allies on the journey together. We fail to live out the responsibility of unity within the body, and promote ourselves instead. This is easy to do and is likely one of the reasons why the command to love one another is so common in the New Testament.

## **BUSYNESS**

Activity does not equate value or worth. Sometimes it masks an absence of relationship, or, at least, depth in the relationship. Busyness may be an attempt to deflect from the relationship (which often takes more work than checking off a list of tasks) or it may be an attempt to impress others or win their favor (even God's). To be honest, it is also easier than the hard work of relationship and, as such, can function as a deceptive substitute for it. So, even busyness can be a form of idolatry.

## **PROMOTE LEGALISM OVER LOVE**

Make no mistake: Right is right, and truth is truth. But the dogmatic adherence to rule-keeping over relationship with image-bearers of God borders on Pharisaic. It promotes the concern in society today that espouses Christians to be among the most judgmental people on the face of the earth. Jesus rightly said, “For what does it benefit someone to gain the whole world and yet lose his life?” (Mark 8:36). Perhaps a church-sized paraphrase might read something like this: “What does it profit a church if it adheres to the letter of the law but lacks the spirit of love to care for others around them?” This is a classic example of putting the priority of behaving before the need to belong.

## **SUBSTITUTE ENTERTAINMENT FOR WORSHIP**

With the engagement of the seeker-driven movement and its subsequent iterations, some churches have opted to do whatever it takes to draw a crowd, rather than focus on the church proper (the people of God). As such, they have chosen to engage in ways that Christ did not live out or give to His church when He founded it. It is a fleshly way to lead the church that seduces His people with the world rather than setting them apart in holiness for Him.

## **MAJOR ON MINORS**

Many, many churches are caught up in these matters, whether the issue is the color of the carpet, if they should buy a bus for ministry, or what time to start the worship service. These are issues that divide the body of Christ and keep them from focusing on their primary love for Jesus. Rather than centering on the work of redemption and disciple-making, these churches bicker over minor issues that keep them from remaining close to Jesus.

There are, no doubt, many more issues of similar concern. These consequences can become the focus of our attention and the desires of our hearts. When this shift occurs, these preferences replace the primary love we need to have for Jesus.

The challenge is to keep our love for God fresh, vibrant, and growing. Over time, if we are not careful, this relationship—like all others—can

be ignored, neglected, or taken for granted. It must be given attention, prioritized, and nurtured. It requires us to be fully present to make the most of it and for the relationship to flourish and grow.

This reality is one reason why spiritual disciplines are so important for us all, for the church as a whole. Without a passion for the Word (Scripture reading), an eagerness to commune with God (prayer), an enthusiasm to celebrate His worth (worship), and a hunger to show others (service and sharing), the relationship grows stale and dry. And when the relationship becomes strained, the heart will harden. And when the heart hardens, we cannot love Jesus as we should nor as He commands us to do above all else in life.

Struggling churches, those failing to thrive as they should, often start their descent and decline when an alternative or substitute value replaces their primary love for Jesus. This shift is often unintentional and may even

***While programs  
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dependence on  
them is.***

happen with the best of motivations (for example, by replacing effectiveness with efficiency). As a result, the integral “following Jesus” part of the journey can be unconsciously replaced by a programmatic, almost automatic response. While programs are not bad, dependence on them is. And if we are not careful, they can easily replace the hard(er) work of living in relationship with the living God who leads us on this journey.

In the remainder of this manual, we desire to show the church how to start the journey back to the primary loving, life-giving relationship Jesus desires for us all.

There is nothing God wants more for us and nothing we need more.

## CHURCH CHECKLIST FOR CONSIDERATION

*Have we:*

- ☐ Replaced God's agenda with our own?
- ☐ Neglected God's view of success for our own?
- ☐ Allowed interpersonal conflict to continue among God's people?
- ☐ Become too busy with activity?
- ☐ Promoted complete doctrinal agreement over the primacy of relationship?
- ☐ Substituted entertainment for worship?
- ☐ Majored on minors?





## FAQS

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### **How do I know if my church needs to go through this material?**

This is an art, not a science. That being said, most churches that need this material will show similar characteristics. They will have some or all of the following elements in their current church life: They are hard-hearted (calloused), contentious, rebellious against God-ordained authority, fatigued, busybodies, unfocused, operating out of a sense of duty or obligation, and without joy and celebration. Churches that definitely need this would include ones who are “stuck” in their preferences, operate in their own agenda, have power dynamics at work, or are functioning in a codependent way with immature leaders who insist on having their own way. On a less dramatic note, if the church’s life in Christ has become stale, dry, routine, boring—or worse, if they are angry, frustrated, and miserable—then this workshop would be a good starting place for them.

### **How do I determine whether we should do one session or more with my church?**

Only you know how ready your congregation is for a study like this. If your people are eager, then I suggest you do all four sessions (give or take, four hours in length total), back-to-back in a workshop format. Claude King and I would both affirm that all four sessions would be in the best interest of the church. However, there may be situations where it is better or even prudent to do a shorter one, two, or three-session format. If they need a slower pace to digest the material, do them in a weekly fashion over the course of a month. If they are only ready to be



introduced to the concept, then do a one-session overview and reflect on their results before you do more.

I cannot say this strongly enough, though: Please do not choose to do the one-hour overview simply to rush through the material and complete it! That's diametrically opposed to what we're hoping to accomplish here—the spending of time with God, the wooing of the Spirit, and the yearning to return to a closer relationship with Jesus than we have currently. You cannot rush the process; however, we do hope your congregation will make the most of it.

### **Who should be invited to be a part of the workshop? Should it be a specific group or a churchwide invitation?**

It would be best, in our opinion, for the pastor to experience the material first, if he is going to lead the workshop himself. Then, he can lead the church through the study in a subsequent opportunity. However, if he brings in an outsider to lead the study, then the leadership of the church—including the pastor—would be a good place to start before others participate. A follow-up offering would allow the entire church to go through the workshop, as needed and desired.

### **If there is a troublemaker in the church, should he or she be a participant in the workshop itself? Or will his or her presence create more difficulty?**

It is likely best to have this individual be a part of the group study. However, you will certainly want to saturate your study in preparatory prayer, especially for this person and his or her involvement. Pray that the Holy Spirit will bring conviction and repentance to the heart of this individual. In addition, you may want to personally meet with him or her beforehand to make sure the purpose of the study is understood and that the appropriate expectations are met. Do not let a troublemaker hijack the group dynamic with bullying or offensive behavior. Keep on track as there is little time to digress or follow rabbit trails. Be sure to have another elder or deacon prepared to help you if the person in question begins to cause difficulty for the rest of the group.

### **Why do you start the material with the “Jesus stories” of the leaders or members who participate?**

In the first place, this practice is fundamental to the “remembering” nature of what must happen in the hearts of God’s people. Many have likely not reflected on Jesus’ gift of salvation in many, many years. They have forgotten, or taken for granted, the precious nature of God’s grace in redeeming them. In the second place, it may surface some unregenerate members in your church, as they will not have a Jesus story to tell or remember. This may, in fact, be the reason your church finds itself in the situation it is in and why it is not in love with Jesus as it should be.

### **Can I skip the repentance section of material in the workshop?**

In our opinion, absolutely not. Repentance is a missing ingredient in most local churches today. In the passage of Scripture foundational to this particular study, it is critical. In fact, it could be argued that without it, the church cannot return to the love relationship with Jesus that its people need. There is a spiritual reason, as opposed to other reasons, the church is in the situation it now faces. Repentance is God’s antidote to correct this course and move the church back to a place of following Him in the right direction.

### **Is it necessary to have action plans coming out of the final session?**

The action plans are what make this experience more than simply an intellectual exercise. They move the church into action. Behavior is evidence of heart transformation. So make sure that the learning experience is completed with follow-up actions for those involved. Hopefully, these will include spiritual disciplines and church unity events that will help the body move closer and more joyfully toward Christ. This may even mean giving yourself permission to eliminate some things from your personal or collective calendar to focus more clearly on your relationship with Christ.

### **Are the videos necessary in the workshop?**

No, they are not a necessity, but rather a reinforcement of the truths already shared. However, visual and musical elements “speak” to a different part of our brain, and, often, to our heart. They evoke emotion, as well. If our whole being is to love God first, then we must move beyond only the mind, to involve the emotive, the kinetic, and even the behavioral, as well. You may find better videos and if so, by all means, use them! However, the objective with the workshop material is to not only satisfy the mind, but to move beyond it, and satisfy the heart and to let the Holy Spirit bring His transformation to our entire being and to the church, which belongs to Jesus Christ, for His glory and honor and for our good.

### **How do I access the teacher and student materials for the workshop?**

You can access the teacher and student materials for free at [www.fallinginlovewithJesusagain.com](http://www.fallinginlovewithJesusagain.com). The materials are easy to use and designed to be reproducible and shared with those participating in your workshop. You can also access the materials by scanning the QR code below.



# RENEW TEACHING PLAN

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**By Claude King**

*Shared at the 2023 Replant Summit*



**The Renew Teaching Plan is an alternative, additional way to lead your church back into a love relationship with Jesus. The teaching plan is shared here, and there are not workshop materials for this format.**

**Renew Description:** A four-hour catalytic experience to encounter God and respond to His plea to return to Him and begin the journey to personal and church renewal.

**Texts:** We will use our Bibles and *Return to Me: God's Plea and Promise to His Church* by Claude V. King, coauthor of *Experiencing God*.

### **Supplemental Resources for Church Renewal**

- *Return to Me* supplemental videos
- *Come to the Lord's Table* by Claude King
- *Fresh Encounter* by Henry and Richard Blackaby and Claude King
- Consecrate the People: [www.growingdisciples.net](http://www.growingdisciples.net)
- Praying in Agreement video

**Two-Part Objective:** By participating in this Renew workshop members will encounter the living Christ in such a way that they begin a personal journey of returning to the Lord. Members will also demonstrate their commitment to Christ as head of His church by faithfully completing an initial study of *Return to Me* in small, redemptive fellowships.

## **Preparations:**

- Set up the room with enough tables for 7-8 participants to sit together at each one. Provide any audiovisual equipment you intend to use.
- Order a copy of *Return to Me* for each participant.
- Provide refreshments or, better yet, a modest meal.
- Study *Return to Me* (especially the Pastor/Leader Guide on pp. 112-115) and be prepared to facilitate the Introductory Session (pp. 6-7) according to the plan below. Prepare to incorporate the following activities as time permits.
- Regarding Spiritual Markers in Part 2 and the optional Departure Markers at the end, do some research (or ask others to assist you) in identifying things in your church's history that might be encouraging or convicting.
- Create and Reproduce copies of the Praying for One Another prayer target.
- Promote the workshop as part of a churchwide emphasis on personal and church renewal. Explain your desire for the church to study *Return to Me* following the event but that participation in the remainder of the study will be not be required.

## **PART 1: The Introductory Session**

(90 minutes)

Follow the plans for the Introductory Session on pages 6-7 of *Return to Me*, but reserve response to the Renewal Group Covenant segment until the end of the workshop. Because you will not be rushed for time, allow adequate time for people to share responses throughout the session.

## **Break**

(15 minutes)

## **PART 2: What the Spirit Says to the Churches**

(30 minutes)

- In a large group (with all participants), ask volunteers to share one thing from the previous session that was particularly meaningful, encouraging, instructive, or convicting.
- Take a poll of the large group to see how people responded to Activity 4 on page 6. Take note of how many people choose each topic. Write the number in your own book or on a dry-erase board for all to see. If a certain week's topic was dominant in the responses, call attention to it.

- Mention that in Revelation 2 and 3, Jesus sent specific messages to each of seven churches. Ask the group to listen to Christ's message to Ephesus and identify what He called them to do.
- Read Revelation 2:1-7. [Answer: remember, repent, and return to their first works.]
- Pray and ask Christ to reveal the truth about your members and church over the coming weeks just as clearly as He did to the seven churches in Revelation 2 and 3. Pray for open ears and willing hearts to respond.
- Ask the large group to share Spiritual Markers of what God has done in your church. Explain that in the Old Testament, people would often set up a marker or build an altar as a reminder of what God did in that place. Spiritual markers are not so much about what we have accomplished as they are about what God has done in and through us. They would include such things as:
  - A significant movement of people coming to Christ
  - Churches or missions started
  - Spiritual impact through a mission trip or special event
  - People who have responded to God's call to missions or other vocational ministry callings
  - Specific and/or dramatic answers to prayer
  - Times of clear guidance or provision in seasons of need
  - Reconciliation among members, in marriages, or within families
  - Positive community impact because of God's work through your church
  - A significant message that deeply impacted people as the Spirit worked in them
- Invite a few people to pray aloud, thanking, praising, and/or worshipping God for what He has done.
- Read the Scriptures and read or tell the story on page 10, as well as the first paragraph on page 11. Ask members to complete Activity 4 on page 11 and share with their small group what they believe are the most significant blemishes in the churches they know.
- Ask all members to individually complete Activity 5 (page 11), read the following two paragraphs, and privately pray by following the instructions at the bottom of the page.



## **PART 3: Praying for One Another**

(30 minutes)

Prayer is an important part of hearing from God because it is two-way communication with Christ, the head of the church.

1. Play the “Praying in Agreement” video and ask groups to listen for what may need to change in order to pray in agreement with one another.
2. After the video ends, ask volunteers to respond in prayer within their small groups. These may be sentence-long prayers. They may be personal responses to the Lord or voiced prayers for your group or church. Ask the Lord to teach your church to pray in agreement.
3. Because your church wants to know what Jesus has to say to your church (just as He spoke to the churches in Revelation 2–3), ask Him to reveal His desires for your church. Invite Him to reveal the things that need to change in order for you to be the body of Christ He desires.
4. Distribute the Praying for One Another handout to each participant (illustration on the next page).

Quickly review the topics on the prayer target. Explain that you are entering a time of conversational prayer. Take turns praying about one topic at a time. One prayer may be shaped by the previous prayer or by a Scripture quoted. If your people are not accustomed to praying aloud, guide the large group to pray. Give people permission to pray silently knowing that God hears those prayers, too. If your people are familiar with praying in small groups, ask the small groups to pray so that more praying can be done and so everyone has an opportunity to pray. Encourage people to pay attention to what the Spirit is guiding you to pray.

5. Debrief the group or groups after you have prayed. What do you sense God is wanting to say or do in your church? (Don’t just make something up.)



### **Modest Meal:**

(up to 30 minutes)

Encourage members to discuss what they sense God is saying to your church as they eat together in fellowship.

### **PART 4: Renewal Group Experience**

(35 minutes)

Introduce the Renewal Group process (p. 126) but only focus on questions 4 through 7. Call attention to the bookmark. Ask members to turn to Day 15 (pp. 46-47). Note: you may select a different day's lesson if a specific topic is shown to be more significant for your church.

1. Ask one volunteer in each group to guide his or her group through reading the Scriptures in the lesson and responding to questions 4-7.
2. You may have to interrupt groups that haven't finished. Explain that you wanted to give them a taste of the process used in *Return to Me*.

## PART 5: Next Steps in Returning to the Lord

(10 minutes)

Share your church's plans to offer a small-group study of *Return to Me*. Invite members to turn to the group covenant on page 125. Invite everyone to read the covenant when they get home and to prayerfully consider participating in this study with your church body.

**Optional Focus:** This could be incorporated after the Spiritual Markers process. A spiritual leader needs to be prepared to facilitate a time like this with a readiness to repent and return to the Lord in areas where the church has departed. You would need to adjust time frames for the other parts. These markers may well surface during your study of *Return to Me* in the coming weeks. You may want to plan a “body life” town-hall kind of experience to process what God has been saying to your church.

1. A **Departure Marker** is a time where the church departed from the Lord in a way that negatively impacted the church and even her reputation in the community. Departure markers are things such as
  - a. A church split
  - b. Moral failure by leaders or prominent laity
  - c. A bad, immoral, unethical, or illegal decision or action that impacted the church and her reputation
  - d. Widespread corporate sin
  - e. A time when something happened to change the environment or effectiveness of the church (You may not even know the reason, but you know something happened from which the church hasn't recovered.)
2. This is a very delicate time. If departure markers have been dealt with in the past, you do not need to rehearse them. However, if those departure markers are still impacting the church, a response to the Lord is needed. Pray and ask the Lord to grant discernment.

Rather than discuss these at this time, invite members to write notes to themselves in their journal on page 116 and pray about what the Lord would have you do.



## NEXT STEPS

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Congratulations!

You've made it through this manual and have hopefully recognized your church's need to tackle this important subject. Whether you've chosen to lead your congregation, or simply its leaders, through this material in a workshop or a multi-session class setting, you have seen the value in steering your people into a deeper, more loving relationship with Jesus. I believe our Lord is pleased with this decision! It will lead to a deeper and more fruitful relationship with Him in the years to come. This will, in turn, translate into more meaningful service for our Lord.

So, what's next?

Good question! It's an inquiry that may lead you in several different directions. If you desire to go even deeper into your church's relationship with Jesus and have seen positive results from this workshop, then we recommend you consider one of Claude King's workbook series for interactive growth and development. Claude has several studies that can be of help, all listed below. Some are only a week long, while others are 50 days in length or somewhere in between. How long or in depth your church is willing to go or has the maturity to go is only something you can know, so pray and follow the Lord's leading on this.

- *Consecrate Yourself*
- *At the Lord's Table*
- *Return to Me*
- *Fresh Encounter*

It may be that you need to, in essence, repeat this initial experience from a different perspective and plan for subsequent follow-up at the same time. We then recommend you follow the workshop directions for *Renew* by Claude King and the subsequent study of *Return to Me*. (However, the workshop is not necessary for you to move directly into the *Return to Me* interactive study.)

Another option would be *Experiencing God* as a good follow-up to our workshop.

If you prefer an interactive experience and not a study for a follow-up, consider a “remembering” experience like a history weekend, a “repenting” experience like a solemn assembly, or a “renewal” experience like a vision retreat. Perhaps your church could put on all three events, scattered over the course of the year.

But whatever you do, please do something! However, do not do so much so quickly that it stifles the heart and affection for Jesus you’ve recently rediscovered. Revel in that, with stories and testimonies of God’s goodness and presence among you. Ask, “What is the Spirit saying to the churches?” and listen for His voice. Celebrate His presence and make much of His goodness.

Here’s hoping you have drawn closer to Christ as a result of this material. And may you follow Him closely and love Him more dearly with all your heart, mind, soul, and strength in the years ahead.

*Soli Deo Gloria!*



