



*How the Good News makes sense  
of discipleship, church, mission,  
and everything else.*

*Prepared by the Contextual Mission Subcommittee  
Anglican Diocese of Ottawa*

PARISH BOOK STUDY

## Introduction from your Contextual Mission Subcommittee

How is God calling us to proclaim the good news in our time and place?

The way we respond to this question is what we call contextual mission.

It is “mission” because we are participating in Jesus’ mission to proclaim the good news.

It is “contextual” because the way we do so must be shaped by the realities and concerns of our current context, our time and our place. Our parish ministries do not exist for themselves. Our mission as church is for the sake of the world. We are called to share the love of God in ways that are aware of the cultures and situations of people in the wider community.

## How to use this group study

There are ten chapters in *The Unfolding Gospel* plus a foreword, introduction, and conclusion. Each chapter has its own page of questions for reflection. For the purposes of your group study, please feel free to divide the book into the sections and over a timeframe you think will work best for your group.

## Reading Outline

### Part 1      What Is the Gospel?

*Foreword by David Fitch*

*Introduction (The Kind You Really Need to Read)*

*Chapter 1 - What Is the Gospel: Complexity and Simplicity*

### Part 2      *What Is Discipleship?*

Chapter 2 – The Gospel, Conversion, and Baptism: A Threefold Knot

Chapter 3 – The Gospel and Discipleship: Three Tools of the Trade

Chapter 4 – The Gospel and Discipleship: Three more – plus One

### Part 3      *The Church, Evangelism, and Culture*

Chapter 5 – The Gospel and Church: Back to Basics

Chapter 6 – The Gospel and Evangelism: Can It Be Redeemed?

Chapter 7 – The Gospel and Culture: Created, Damaged, Restored

### Part 4      *Doing Contextual Mission*

Chapter 8 – The Gospel and Inherited Churches: Moving to Missional

Chapter 9 – The Gospel and Church Planting: Two Models

Chapter 10 – The Gospel and Leadership: The Many and the Few

Conclusion – The Gospel and New Beginnings

# Foreword

*by David Fitch*

## Questions

1. In times of rapid and massive cultural change, David Fitch describes two tendencies of churches: getting defensive or getting accommodative. How have you witnessed either tendency in your own church experience?
2. Fitch applauds John Bowen for offering another option in this book. What is that option? What do you look forward to hearing more about in this book?

# Introduction

## (The Kind You Really Need to Read)

### Questions

1. John Bowen sketches a brief survey of his spiritual roots – the Christian tradition within which he is situated and the spiritual traditions that have nurtured his journey. What spiritual traditions have shaped and informed your journey? Take a few minutes to identify for each other the wealth of spiritual formation you are all bringing to your group.
2. In his introduction, Bowen states his intention for readers of the book:

*What I am hoping is that, rather than advancing the conversation [on missiology], I may reach an audience of people just beginning to think about the future of the church and the meaning of the word missional and bring them up to speed by filling in the background and context against which the conversation is happening. (pg. 6)*

Before going further, verbally gather your current understanding of the word “missional” and where these understandings come from. Feel free to write these on a whiteboard, chart paper, or type them onto a shared screen to display throughout the remainder of this session.

# Chapter 1 ~ What Is the Gospel?

## Complexity and Simplicity

### Questions

1. From pages 11-15, Bowen describes various attempts at explaining of what “the gospel” is. Next he contrasts and relates these *explanations* to a central “big statement of good news” announced by Jesus in the Gospel of Mark. What is that statement? (pg. 20, Figure 1.2). What benefits does this approach offer to us as a diverse community of Christians with different personal experiences?
2. Why does Bowen *not* have a chapter in his book about mission (pg. 21-22)? Discuss his reasoning:

*I would still contend that the primary need of the church is not to recapture a sense of mission... (pg. 22)*

3. “[Jesus] is both the circumference of the circle and its centre” (pg. 24). What does this mean?
4. What statement, analogy, or image excited you the most in these introductory chapters? Discuss in small groups. To conclude your session, report back to the whole group what you heard. If nothing excited you, why?

## Chapter 2 ~ The Gospel, Conversion, and Baptism: A Threefold Knot

### Questions

1. Bowen starts the chapter paying close attention to two “neighbouring stories” in the Gospel of Mark: 1) Jesus’s announcement of the good news and 2) the calling of the first disciples (pg. 31-34). What connections does Bowen draw between “repent” and “believe”?
2. Bowen argues that being a disciple includes and transforms other components of our personal identity, “changing [our] minds about what is important in life and reorienting [our] whole existence.” (pg. 33)  
What is a disciple?  
How do disciples learn?
3. Bowen contends “Without the gospel, there would be no church. Church is the gospel in full flower” (pg. 39). Break into pairs or small groups. Answer these two questions and return to the large group to share your answers:
  - How is “church” most clearly an expression of the gospel for you?
  - What do *you* need the church to be in order to believe the “kingdom of God has come near”?
4. Bowen states, “The road from gospel to discipleship and church passes through a doorway called baptism” (pg. 40). Drawing from pages 40-42, write a list on chart paper or a whiteboard of the descriptions and meanings of baptism Bowen uses. What’s familiar to you in these descriptions? What’s new to you? What may be missing from them?
5. The concluding section of this chapter is titled “Getting Personal.” In pairs or small groups, share your answers to these two questions:
  - What do *you* think Christianity is all about?
  - What does repentance, believing, discipleship, and “living out your baptism” have to do with your answer to the first question?

## Chapter 3 ~ The Gospel and Discipleship: Three Tools of the Trade

### Questions

1. As he develops the “school of Jesus” as a metaphor for baptism, Bowen writes:

*“School doesn’t just equip us to change the world, although it does that. School also changes us, and at the deepest level...in the school of Jesus, personal change is right there at the heart of the learning”* (pg. 45-46).

Share with one another how any experience of schooling changed you (i.e. trade school, apprenticeship, grade school, college or university, etc.). Reflect together on how the process of learning formed your habits, thinking, and decision-making.

2. Bowen identifies three “tools of the trade” for Christian discipleship: community, bible, and prayer. Divide into three groups. Assign each group one of the following questions to discuss. Return to the whole group to share a summary of your discussions.

- a. Community

*“All works of art embody something of the character of the artist...God is working to restore the kind of community that exists within the Trinity – a community of love, dynamism, and cooperation.”* (pg. 47)

Why can’t you be a disciple of Jesus by yourself?

- b. Bible

*“[Moral philosopher] Alasdair MacIntyre once wrote, ‘I can only answer the question, ‘What am I to do?’ if I can answer the prior question, ‘Of what story or stories do I find myself a part.’”* (pg. 50)

What does it mean to “live out of the Bible’s story”?

- c. Prayer

*“Is it too whimsical to suggest that as we spend time in the presence of God, seeking to feel as God feels about the world – finding joy in the things that delight God and feeling grief at the things that break God’s heart – the more we grow like God?”* (pg. 55-56)

Share your responses to this rhetorical question.

Additionally, you can discuss this statement:

*Prayer that I hoped might change others ended up changing me. That’s one way God chips away at our character to make us more like Jesus.”* (pg. 56)

## Chapter 4 ~ The Gospel and Discipleship: Three More – plus One

### Questions

1. In his second chapter on the gospel and discipleship, Bowen adds three more “tools of the trade” for consideration: communion, obedience, and the cross. Divide into three groups. Assign each group one of the following questions to discuss. Return to the whole group to share a summary of the discussion. If time permits, feel free to rotate topics or group members so participants can discuss more than one “tool.”
  - Communion  
*“This is where we enter the story. I imagine it this way. The bread goes from Jesus to John, who passes it to Peter, who passes it to James, who passes it to Andrew, and so on until it comes to the end of the line – perhaps Bartholomew. And then Bartholomew turns – and it is not the end of the line after all. Who is next? Guess what: the next disciple in line is you...it was disciples who took part in the first communion; it is disciples who take part today. There is a direct and unbroken line of succession from them to us.”* (pg. 61-62)  
How is communion a meal to renew disciples for mission?
  - Obedience  
*“But the ways of the kingdom, which in general are not natural to us, need to become precisely that – second nature to us. They are not generally our first nature. Dying to that first nature and growing into that second nature is precisely what God’s work in our lives is all about.”* (pg. 63)  
Obedience gets a bad rap in our world. But reflect more closely on the kinds of daily obedience we practice that makes life in community liveable. How might obedience to the ways of the kingdom manifest the life God is renewing in the midst of the world?
  - The Cross  
Reflect on these two observations Bowen makes in reference to Jesus’s injunction to “take up your cross.” What’s helpful to you? Surprising? Unsettling?
    - a. *“Why such a cruel and violent image? I believe it is because God’s work of renewing all things – ourselves and the world – involves radical surgery. Restoration is not a walk a park.”* (pg. 66)
    - b. *“This is why we “cannot” be disciples without a cross: the heart of discipleship is death...That’s why the Christian life begins with baptism, a symbol of death.”* (pg. 66)
2. On page 68, read Bowen’s paraphrase of Archbishop Temple’s imaginative exercise. When and how do we acknowledge the presence and power of Jesus’ Spirit in us personally and in the life of our parish communities?



## Chapter 5 ~ The Gospel and the Church: Back to Basics

### Questions

1. The failure of the Kodak company is an illustration of what can happen to a business when it stops asking the question, “What business are we in today?” (pg. 72). Bowen uses this illustration to pose two related questions. Gather your group’s answers to these two questions below:

*The question for a declining church, therefore, is not “How can we get back to business as it was fifty years ago?...The fundamental question is “What business is the church in? What are we really about?” (pg. 73)*

2. Bowen uses a metaphor: the gospel is water; the Church is a water container (pg. 73-79). After expanding on this metaphor, he writes:

*This seems to me a lovely illustration of the simple but crucial fact that “church” looks different in different places and at different times. At the same time, there are things that all churches have in common...The water remains the same though the container is different. (pg. 77)*

What is essential (or primary) to being “church” and what can change (or is secondary)? Or, to use the imagery: what is water and what is container? Explore this question as a large group. Listen respectfully for both what group members easily agree on and on where members differ. *\*Note: the intention of this question is to notice similarities and differences among you, both common ground and different perspectives.*

3. How does missiologist Goerge Lings’ four dimensions for church (*up, in, out, of*) help us “[honour] the [Christian] tradition while rethinking it for a fresh context” (pg. 79-81)? Share examples of where and how you’ve seen “faithful improvisation” on the tradition in any of the four dimensions.
4. George Lings and Andrew Walls offer two definitions of church (pg. 84). Bowen applies these three questions to both definitions:
  - *Can we trace the influence of the gospel in the way these communities are shaped?*
  - *Can we discern the outline of the gospel in the way they live?*
  - *Is Jesus and his transforming work at the heart of these groups?*

Apply these three questions to your parish ministry.

*\*Suggestion: make time for participants to draw or write this out independently; return to the group to share findings.*

## Chapter 6 ~ The Gospel and Evangelism: Can It Be Redeemed?

### Questions

1. Bowen writes,

*The heart of evangelism is talking about the gospel...And yes, I am aware that that makes many of us uncomfortable. However, talking is an inescapable part of the story. (pg. 90)*

*To be a Christian is to cooperate with Jesus in the work of God's kingdom...How did Jesus do it? We've seen him do it already. Three things: he talked about the kingdom, he demonstrated what it was like by the way he lived, and he invited people to be a part of it. And guess what: the first and the third are to do with talking. (pg. 91-92)*

Who first told you about Christian faith (i.e. family members, friends, neighbours, Sunday school teachers, preachers)? How does it affect your feeling about “evangelism” when you consider that they were evangelists to you?

2. Bowen gives a brief account of how his working definitions of *evangelism* have evolved over time (pg. 93-96). His latest definition has both a *broadness* and a *specificity* to it. Why? What's his reasoning?
3. Bowen warns us to beware of evangelism becoming a “thing” that we do” (pg. 102) rather than an “overflow” of who we are. How does the analogy of midwifery (pg. 95-96) reframe evangelism for us (or not)?
4. Bowen's diagram of the inverted triangle visualizes the teamwork of evangelism (pg. 100). Where do you see your gifts being used in this triangle? Where may God be inviting you to grow in the practice of evangelism (we can't all clear stones! See pg. 100)?

## Chapter 7 ~ The Gospel and Culture: Created, Damaged, Restored

### Questions

1. Reflecting on St. Paul's approach to the gospel and culture (1 Corinthians 9.19-23), Bowen writes,

*"Paul doesn't hesitate to adapt himself to the culture he is in, but not because he is unsure of himself. Precisely the opposite...Paul knows the story he inhabits and knows something of the role he plays in that story. The gospel has made him who he is, so he is not fearful of different cultures, or of embracing other realities, in order to share that same gospel with others."* (pg. 109)

In the group, share experiences where you've had confidence knowing the part you play in a larger whole (i.e. a workplace, a theatre production, a citizen, etc.). When you know your part, in what ways are you restrained? In what ways are you liberated?

2. In affirmation of human culture, Bowen writes, "The ultimate proof of God's affirmation of culture lies, like everything else, in Jesus Christ and his good news" (pg. 111). How so? *\*Suggestion: read pages 112-115.*
3. On the need for discernment about human cultures, Bowen claims that the careful translation, adaptation, and inculturation of the gospel into any human culture is both an act of blessing (because culture is good) and challenge ("because all cultures fall short of the norms of the kingdom"). Bowen goes on to describe "nonnegotiable barriers" and "barriers of our own making" (pg. 116-118). Share specific examples of how these two kinds of barriers facilitate or obstruct the gospel being heard.
4. Bowen raises the question of separating (or distinguishing) church from the surrounding culture. Then he describes two challenges:
  - "theological problem" (pg. 119) – God is shaping a new community to bless the world, but God is also working outside the Church.
  - "pragmatic problem" (pg. 121) – God is shaping a new community to bless the world, but the Church's internal life is never perfect.

Next, he proposes a "firm" and "flexible" approach using the image of a ballet dancer (pg. 122). Does this image help (re)frame the relationship of church and culture for you?

## Chapter 8 ~ The Gospel and Inherited Churches: Moving to Missional

### Questions

1. At the very start of this chapter, Bowen shifts the framing of the whole conversation from “*the church*” to “churches.” He writes,

*“The local church is where the theological rubber meets the missional road. If all this theory doesn’t work here, then it doesn’t work anywhere... We cannot talk about that grandiose, abstract thing called ‘the universal church’ if there is no local church.”* (pg. 123)

As a group, discuss the relationship between theory and practice. Share examples of the reciprocity (or exchange) of theory and practice in other areas of your lives (the workplace, parenting, relationships, etc.).

2. According to Bowen, this is the critical question for inherited churches: “How can we best serve the gospel that brought us into existence in the first place?” (pg. 126).
  - Define “inherited churches” (pg. 124) for each other and answer this question: is our parish an inherited church?
  - Grounded in Jesus’ exhortation of Mark 8.35, Bowen describes “a good kind of death” – or laying down of inherited things – to pick up better things to represent the gospel on pages 126-127. What connections do you see between our theology and mission, theory and practice, faith and spirituality? Name them for each other.
3. Bowen lists six suggestions for inherited churches (pg. 127-137). Divide into two groups. Assign each group three of the six suggestions to discuss (“don’t beat yourself up,” “teach the gospel,” “360-degree listening,” look at your budget through a mission lens,” “use the church building,” “be welcoming”). Return to the whole group to answer this question: where do you feel most capable? Where do you need strengthening?
4. “When we begin to think ‘mission,’ there are a few automatic reactions that at first look good but can easily work against real mission” (pg. 137). What are the four warnings Bowen lists? How do his warnings test against your experience? What wisdom is Bowen offering to mitigate the risks of well-intentioned but counter-productive initiatives?

## Chapter 9 ~ The Gospel and Church Planting: Two Models

### Questions

1. “If we understand the gospel, we will want to plant new churches. It’s as simple as that” (pg. 142). Read Bowen’s justifications for this statement on page 142. In your own words explain to one another why Bowen thinks an understanding of the gospel leads to church planting. Do you agree? If yes, why? If maybe or not, explain.
2. Bowen contrasts traditional church planting and contextual church planting (pg. 143-151). He summarizes the contrast this way:

*“[Contextual church planting] begins with prayer; not a program; not with a building but with relationships; with offering service rather than leading services; and with discerning where God is already at work rather than with a predetermined strategy.”*  
(pg. 147)

In your own parish what examples of contextual mission initiatives started in prayer, relationship, and service (in contrast to building, program, and liturgies)? How do you discern the work of God in them? How have they nurtured discipleship of Jesus?

3. Bowen unpacks Bishop Croft’s definition of new worshipping communities into five discrete steps: “the attempt to <sup>[1]</sup>**go to where people are**, <sup>[2]</sup>**listen carefully to the context**, and <sup>[3]</sup>**through service** <sup>[4]</sup>**form new communities of faith** <sup>[5]</sup>**which have the potential to grow into church in their own right**” (pg. 147). Next, he tells a story about his friend Matt and the St. Clair community in Hamilton, Ontario (pg. 150-151). As a large group, identify the five steps of Croft’s definition in the origins and development of the St. Clair community. Answer these questions:
  - what attracts you about the story?
  - what worries you?
  - what can we learn from it?

## Chapter 10 ~ The Gospel and Leadership: The Many and the Few

### Questions

1. Bowen points out an irony between the contemporary church's preoccupation with the science of "church leadership" and the New Testament writings' apparent dispassion on the subject (pg. 159). Next, he then tells the story about Larry's leadership with this conclusion:

*"This has led to a deep-seated conviction about the nature of leadership in the church: we lead according to who God made us. Or, to put it another way, we lead in the areas where we are gifted." (pg. 161)*

As a large group, identify for one another the kinds of leadership being offered in your parish. To get started, think about a typical Sunday gathering – what leadership is being offered in the week preceding a Sunday service to make it possible? Follow up: are all leaders the same kinds of people with the same kinds of gifts?

2. Bowen highlights how the New Testament writings bother less with the word *leader* and much more with the subject of spiritual gifts. Quoting theologian Michael Green on the "gift lists" in the New Testament (Romans 12.6-8, 1 Corinthians 12.8-10, 1 Corinthians 28, Ephesians 4.11, and 1 Peter 4.9-11), Bowen makes this conclusion: "All these lists are seeking to give examples of what the Spirit will do in the life of the believer, not to make exhaustive lists of gifts" (pg. 161).

Read this first half of page 162 aloud.

In your own words, what is the relationship between Christian leadership and giftedness? How does the gospel interact with all our gifts (pg. 162-166)?

3. Having made a clear case for the varieties of giftedness and leadership present in any gospel-shaped community, Bowen adds an additional lens to focus on certain types of leadership that "create the cultural and organizational framework within which other leaders...can do their job" (pg. 167).

Divide into two or three groups for discussion. Assign each group two or three of the six types of organizing leadership he lists ("Pastor and Teacher," "The Palliative Care Pastor," "The Evangelist," "The Prophet," "The Apostle," and "The Turnaround Leader"). Return to the whole group to answer two questions: Can you think of leaders you know or know of in each category, either in your own church or in another? Which kind of leader would you say is most needed in our churches now? Why?

## Conclusion:

### The Gospel and New Beginnings

#### Questions

1. As a reflection on his life's work in discipleship and evangelism, John Bowen offers this insight: "Change is itself part of Christian tradition" (pg. 179). If that is true, what impact will that have on our thinking? More specifically, if it is true, what is liberating, worrying, or stretching for us as a community?
2. The title of Bowen's book is *The Unfolding Gospel*. In his conclusion he contrasts "pictures" with "stories" (pg. 180). Do you find this analogy useful? If yes, why? If no, why?
3. Quoting theologians Eric Gritsch and Robert Jenson, "To be itself, the gospel speaks to the living hopes and fears of its actual hearers; to be itself, the gospel changes." To this, Bowen adds,

*"For the unchanging gospel to do its work, it has to change. And so therefore does the church, because it is nothing if it is not a vehicle for the gospel."* (pg. 179)

Returning to the very first question from chapter one of this study ("What Is the Gospel: Complexity and Simplicity"), what is the "big statement of good news" announced by Jesus in the Gospel of Mark (Mark 1.15)? If that is the "unchanging gospel," then how should it be shared to meet the realities and concerns of our current time and place?