

Union with Christ: Homework Questions

Ephesians & J. Todd Billings — 32-Week Study

Grace Presbyterian Church — Post-Grad Group

How to Study This Way: The Inductive Bible Study Method

Throughout this study, our Bible study questions follow a simple three-step pattern: Observation, Interpretation, and Application. This is called inductive Bible study — instead of starting with a conclusion and looking for verses to support it, we start with the text itself and let it lead us to its meaning and then to our response. Each week's passage will move through all three steps, in order.

Observation — What does the text actually say?

Before asking what a passage means, we slow down and look closely at what's there: repeated words and phrases, who is speaking, what is commanded or promised, how ideas connect to one another. Observation questions have answers you can point to directly in the verses — they're not about opinion yet, just careful reading.

Interpretation — What does it mean?

Once we've seen what the text says, we ask what it means — in its own context, and in light of the rest of Scripture. Interpretation questions often draw connections: to Billings' reading for that week, to other passages, or to the doctrine of union with Christ that runs through this whole study. This is where we ask “why,” not just “what.”

Application — What does it mean for me?

Finally, we bring the passage home. Application questions ask how this truth should shape our actual lives this week — our prayers, our relationships, our sense of identity in Christ. This step is often the most personal and can be the most uncomfortable, but it's the reason we study Scripture at all: not just to know it, but to be changed by it.

Why this order matters:

Skipping straight to application without observation and interpretation tends to produce shallow, self-focused readings of Scripture. Taking the steps in order trains us to let the text itself set the agenda, rather than reading our own assumptions into it.

Scripture translation Unless otherwise noted, Scripture quotations and wording in this guide follow the English Standard Version (ESV). Wording may vary in other translations.

Week 2

Ephesians 1:1–14 and Billings, Introduction

Ephesians 1:1–14

OBSERVATION

1. Underline every occurrence of 'in Christ,' 'in him,' or 'in the Beloved' in verses 3–14. Where does this language appear in the passage?

2. List the spiritual blessings Paul names in verses 3–14. Which person of the Trinity is associated with each action?

INTERPRETATION

3. What does Paul's repeated 'in Christ' language suggest about how believers receive these blessings?

4. Why might Paul reach for the specific image of "adoption" (v. 5) rather than simply "forgiveness" or "membership" to describe what union with Christ accomplishes?

APPLICATION

5. Given how many of these blessings you already possess only because you are “in Christ,” what is one specific blessing from this list you want to thank God for by name this week?

6. If everything Paul lists here is true of you only because you are “in Christ” and not because of anything you've done, what is one area of your life right now where you're tempted to seek identity, security, or approval from something other than this union?

Billings, Introduction

1. Billings frames his method as “a theology of retrieval.” In his own words, what are the three virtues of reading scripture alongside Christians of the past that he identifies in “Seeing with New Eyes”?

2. Billings uses his own experience in a Ugandan village — discovering kinship structures he was blind to — as an analogy for theological retrieval. What was he blind to, and what did it help him see in scripture?

3. Billings warns that MTD-style faith treats God as someone to consult only “when needed to resolve a problem.” Where in your own prayer life this past month have you related to God more like an on-call consultant than a Father you commune with continually?

4. As you begin this year in Ephesians and Billings together, what's one assumption about God, salvation, or the Christian life you're willing to let this study challenge?

Week 3

Ephesians 1:15–23 and Billings Ch. 1, “Adopted by the Triune God”

Ephesians 1:15–23

OBSERVATION

1. Paul reports that he has heard of the Ephesians’ faith and love and, as a result, never stops giving thanks and praying for them (vv. 15–16). List each specific thing he asks God to give them in verses 17–19.

2. List the words and images Paul uses in verses 20–23 to describe Christ’s authority and his relationship to the church.

INTERPRETATION

3. Paul prays that believers would come to know something they presumably already possess (hope, inheritance, power) rather than praying that they would newly receive it. What does that tell us about the relationship between having a spiritual truth and grasping or experiencing it?

4. What does the image of Christ as head and the church as his body communicate about their relationship? How is it more than membership in an organization?

APPLICATION

5. Where do you need to remember that the power that raised Christ is at work in believers? How could that truth shape your prayers this week?

6. When you pray for others, how often do you ask God to deepen their understanding of what is already true in Christ, as Paul does here?

Billings Ch. 1, “Adopted by the Triune God”

1. In Billings’ adapted Kierkegaard parable, why is the day laborer disturbed rather than delighted when the emperor offers to make him his son-in-law?

2. What does Billings say the Greek term *huiiothesia* meant in its ancient Roman legal context, and how does that background illuminate Paul’s use of the word?

3. Where do you keep God at a ‘convenient distance’—welcoming his help while resisting his claim on your identity as his adopted child?

4. How would approaching one decision or relationship as someone already adopted and beloved change what you do this week?

Week 4

Ephesians 2:1–10 and Billings Ch. 1, “God at a Convenient Distance”

Ephesians 2:1–10

OBSERVATION

1. List the words and images Paul uses in verses 1–3 to describe humanity’s condition apart from Christ.
2. Underline ‘together with Christ,’ ‘with him,’ and ‘in Christ Jesus’ in verses 5–7. What actions does God perform for believers with Christ?

INTERPRETATION

3. Taken together, what do the images from verses 1–3 (dead, enslaved to “the prince of the power of the air,” under wrath) communicate about the human condition apart from Christ?
4. Verse 4 begins with “But God” — arguably one of the great pivots in all of scripture. What is it in God’s character, according to verse 4, that moves him to act on behalf of people who were dead in sin?

APPLICATION

5. What would it look like this week to live from the security of being raised and seated with Christ rather than trying to earn your place?

6. What ordinary responsibility could you receive as part of the good works God has prepared, rather than as a performance meant to prove your worth?

Billings Ch. 1, “God at a Convenient Distance”

1. What does Billings mean by the acronym MTD, and what are the five points of the “creed” he lists from Christian Smith’s research?

2. Billings argues MTD is fundamentally “deistic.” Why does he think a religion focused on being “good, nice, and fair” logically implies a distant God rather than a present, saving one?

3. Billings claims MTD functions as an unspoken “American theology” cutting across denominational lines. Where have you caught traces of MTD in your own assumptions about God, prayer, or what a “good Christian life” looks like?

4. If you're honest, which of the five MTD points (a distant watching God, God-wants-you-nice, life's goal is feeling good, God-only-for-emergencies, good-people-go-to-heaven) is most alive in your own unspoken assumptions right now? What's one honest step this week toward a nearer, more communion-shaped view of God instead?

Week 5

1 Corinthians 1:26-31 and Billings Ch. 1, "Learning to Be Children of God"

1 Corinthians 1:26-31 (key passage)

OBSERVATION

1. List every gift Paul says believers have received "because of him" (v. 30) — what four things does he say Christ "became to us"?

2. According to verses 26-28, what kind of people does Paul say God tends to choose (in terms of worldly wisdom, power, and status)? What reason does he give in verse 29 for this pattern?

INTERPRETATION

3. Verse 30 lists righteousness, sanctification, and redemption together as things "in Christ Jesus" — not one without the others. How does this compare to Billings' description of Calvin's "double grace" (justification and sanctification received together, inseparably, in union with Christ)?

4. Verse 31 concludes "let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord" (quoting Jeremiah 9:23-24). Given that these gifts come only "because of him" and are located "in Christ Jesus," what does this suggest about where a Christian's confidence or identity should ultimately rest?

APPLICATION

5. Where do you find yourself measuring your worth or usefulness to God by worldly standards (intelligence, achievement, status) rather than by this same free calling (v. 26)?

6. If righteousness, sanctification, and redemption are all “in Christ Jesus” as a single gift rather than things you build one at a time, what is one area of spiritual growth you've been treating as your own project to perfect, rather than receiving as already secured in Christ?

Billings Ch. 1, “Learning to Be Children of God”

1. Billings quotes Calvin’s famous definition of the “double grace” received in union with Christ. What are the two distinct gifts Calvin names, and how does Billings describe their relationship to each other?

2. Billings uses the language of legal adoption to explain justification: what “legal right” must be secured before any adoption, ancient or modern, can be considered valid, and how does this illuminate what justification accomplishes?

3. According to Billings/Calvin, why is it a mistake to treat sanctification as simply “our response” to grace, something we generate by asking “what would Jesus do”?

4. If spiritual disciplines and service are fruits of union with Christ, rather than ways to earn adoption, how should that change your motivation?

5. Choose one practice—prayer, Communion, or service. How might you approach it as a beloved child receiving grace rather than a candidate being evaluated?

Week 6

Ephesians 2:11–22 and Billings Ch. 2, “The Starting Point” & “Debunking Misunderstandings”

Ephesians 2:11–22

OBSERVATION

1. Paul first describes what the Gentile believers were formerly “separated” or “alienated” from (vv. 11–12), then describes what Christ specifically did to change it (vv. 14–16). List each item in both halves of this before-and-after picture.

2. Underline ‘in Christ Jesus,’ ‘in him,’ ‘in whom,’ and ‘in the Lord’ in verses 13–22. How does this language connect reconciliation, citizenship, and the temple?

INTERPRETATION

3. What do the images of citizenship, household, and temple each reveal about the new community Christ creates?

4. Paul says Christ is the “cornerstone” and the whole structure is built on “the foundation of the apostles and prophets” (v. 20). What is the significance of Christ, not any human leader or tradition, being named as the cornerstone specifically?

APPLICATION

5. This passage describes a real, historical hostility (Jew/Gentile) being reconciled in Christ. What “dividing walls of hostility” in your own relationships or church community might Christ be calling you to see differently in light of this passage?

6. Verse 22 says believers are “being built together” into a dwelling place for God “in the Lord” — an ongoing, corporate, unfinished process, not a private or solitary project. Where do you sense God currently building you together with specific people (your small group, family, church) rather than growing on your own?

Billings Ch. 2, “The Starting Point” & “Debunking Misunderstandings about the Bondage of the Will”

1. Billings says every biblical image of salvation has a “corresponding” or “negative corollary” image of sin. Using John 15:5 and Colossians 2:13, what specific images does he pair together?

2. Billings argues we cannot embrace scripture’s language of union with Christ while quietly discarding its accompanying language about sin. What is he warning against, practically, in church life or personal theology?

3. Where have you been tempted to credit your spiritual growth to your own effort rather than to the Spirit's initiating work?

4. Billings notes that many in our culture assume freedom means "absolute, individualistic autonomy" — choosing above every outside influence. Where in your life does that assumption — that true freedom means total independence — quietly shape your decisions?

Week 7

Galatians 2:20 and Billings Ch. 2, "Augustine and His Reformed Reception"

Galatians 2:20 (key passage)

OBSERVATION

1. In Galatians 2:20, what has happened to Paul, who now lives in him, and how does he describe his present life?
2. List the phrases 'crucified with Christ,' 'Christ who lives in me,' and 'by faith in the Son of God.' What aspect of union with Christ does each phrase emphasize?

INTERPRETATION

3. Read Galatians 2:15–21. How does 'Christ who lives in me' relate to Paul's argument about justification by faith?
4. Paul says Christ "loved me and gave himself for me" — moving from the corporate "us" common in his letters to an intensely personal "me." What is the significance of Paul making the gospel this personal?

APPLICATION

5. Paul says he still lives “in the flesh” — an ordinary, embodied life — even while Christ lives in him. What would it look like this week to let “faith in the Son of God who loved me and gave himself for me” actually animate one ordinary task or relationship, rather than treating “spiritual” faith and “ordinary” life as separate compartments?

6. If you genuinely believed, as Paul did, that your old self has already been crucified and Christ now lives in you, what specific fear, habit, or self-image would you find easiest — or hardest — to let go of?

Billings Ch. 2, “Augustine and His Reformed Reception”

1. Why does Augustine insist that Christ’s human nature was joined to God “gratuitously,” and why does this matter for Augustine’s argument against Pelagius about grace?

2. Billings draws out the theological logic: if Christ’s humanity is constituted by God’s gratuitous grace, what does this imply about the “new humanity” that believers come to share in union with Christ?

3. Augustine's point is that even Christ's exalted human status was pure, unmerited gift. If the one perfect human being received his standing with God purely as gift rather than achievement, what does that free you from having to prove about your own standing this week?

4. Where might remembering that your "new humanity" in Christ is entirely gift — not something you build or achieve — change how you approach a specific temptation to perform or measure up this week (at work, in ministry, in a relationship)?

Week 8

Philippians 2:12-13 and Billings Ch. 2, "Communion with God, the Bondage of the Will, and the Double Grace of Union with Christ"

Philippians 2:12-13 (key passage)

OBSERVATION

1. Paul gives two descriptions in this short passage — one about what believers are to do, one about what God is doing. List exactly what each party is said to do.

2. What phrase does Paul use to describe the posture believers should have as they “work out” their salvation (v. 12)?

INTERPRETATION

3. How does God working in believers ‘to will and to work’ preserve both dependence on grace and meaningful human action?

4. If God is already at work in believers, why does Paul still command them to ‘work out’ their salvation?

APPLICATION

5. Where in your life right now do you find yourself leaning too far toward either extreme — anxious self-effort (as if it's all up to you) or passive waiting (as if nothing is required of you)?

6. What would it look like this week to “work out” something in your faith with real effort, while trusting that God himself is producing the desire and ability in you to do it?

Billings Ch. 2, “Communion with God, the Bondage of the Will, and the Double Grace of Union with Christ”

1. According to Billings, is the Christian life’s “mortification of the flesh” (putting the old self to death) best understood as a rupture of identity or a restoration of identity? Explain using Calvin’s own language.

2. Billings poses a sharp question: does denying humans an “autonomous space” for action in salvation make Christians passive and inert? How does he answer this, using the image of activation?

3. Calvin says our response to faith is truly ours, while all its fruit is credited to God. Do you tend to take credit for growth or minimize the importance of your choices? What would a healthier balance look like?

4. If mortification of the old self is restoration (becoming more truly yourself) rather than rupture (losing yourself) what specific old, false “self” might God be inviting you to keep putting to death this season, and what would dying to it actually free you to become?

Week 9

Acts 2:22-24 and Billings Ch. 2, "Why Is This Position So Surprising Today?" and "Developments...From Luther to the Reformed Scholastics"

Acts 2:22-24 (key passage)

OBSERVATION

1. Peter names two things about how Jesus came to be crucified in verse 23 — one describing God's role, one describing the crowd's role. What are they, in Peter's own words?

2. What reason does Peter give in verse 24 for why death could not hold Jesus?

INTERPRETATION

3. How does verse 23 hold together God's definite plan and genuine human responsibility for Jesus' death?

4. Why is it important that Peter neither excuses human guilt nor denies God's sovereign purpose?

APPLICATION

5. Where in your own life have you experienced something difficult or even wrong done to you by others, yet later recognized God was sovereignly at work through it for good, without that lessening the real wrong that was done?

6. How does knowing that even the crucifixion — the greatest evil ever committed — was held within God's "definite plan" give you confidence about a difficulty or uncertainty you're currently facing?

Billings Ch. 2, "Why Is This Position So Surprising Today?" and "Developments Related to the Freedom of the Bound Will: From Luther to the Reformed Scholastics"

1. Billings offers two "snapshots" to illustrate how surprising his reading of Reformed teaching is to contemporary hearers. Summarize both.

2. Billings explains Luther's target as "a theology of glory" versus a "theology of the cross." What is a theology of glory, and why did Luther consider the phrase *facere quod in se est* ("do what is in you") so dangerous?

3. Reformed theologians affirm both the bondage of the fallen will and real human responsibility. Do these truths seem coherent to you, or do they remain in tension? Explain.

4. Where are you tempted to approach God on a 'do your best and he'll make up the rest' basis rather than resting in Christ?

Week 10

Jeremiah 31:31-34 and Billings Ch. 2, "Why Is Total Communion So Surprising?"

Jeremiah 31:31-34 (key passage)

OBSERVATION

1. List each specific promise God makes about what he himself will do in this new covenant (not what the people must do).

2. Where is God's law located in this new covenant, according to verse 33 — compare this to where the law was given under the old covenant (on stone tablets, Exodus 31:18)?

INTERPRETATION

3. How does God writing his law on the heart differ from giving an external command alone?

4. What does the promise 'I will be their God, and they shall be my people' reveal about the communal and covenantal character of the new covenant?

APPLICATION

5. Where in your life do you still feel like you're trying to follow God's commands as an external rulebook rather than experiencing them as truly written on your heart — things you actually want, not just things you're obligated to do?

6. God promises in this passage to “remember their sin no more.” Is there a specific sin or failure from your past that you have a harder time believing God has truly forgotten than you do believing he's forgiven it?

Billings Ch. 2, “Why Is Total Communion So Surprising?”

1. According to Billings, when did the TULIP acronym actually originate, and what historical document is it usually (and, in his view, poorly) taken to summarize?

2. Billings argues the Canons of Dort were never meant to stand alone as a full statement of Reformed doctrine. What document were they meant to supplement, and what did that fuller document already contain regarding communion with God?

3. Billings suggests that being captured by “TULIP-colored glasses” has caused many Christians — Reformed and non-Reformed alike — to see Reformed theology as fundamentally negative about humanity. Has this chapter changed how you’d describe Reformed theology to someone who only associates it with harsh predestination?

4. The Canons describe grace as gently yet powerfully ‘bending the will back.’ Where have you experienced—or struggled to recognize—grace working this way?

5. Where have you encountered teaching on total depravity that neglected the communion promised in Christ? How did that imbalance affect you?

Week 11

Colossians 3:1–4 (key passage) and Billings Ch. 2, “Conclusion”

Colossians 3:1–4 (key passage)

OBSERVATION

1. This short passage uses the phrase “with Christ” or “with him” three times (“raised with Christ,” “hidden with Christ,” “appear with him”) and calls Christ “your life.” List every phrase in verses 1–4 that ties the believer's identity or destiny directly to Christ.

2. According to these verses, what has already happened to believers (“if then you have been raised with Christ”), and what command follows from that reality?

INTERPRETATION

3. In context, what might Paul mean when he says believers’ lives are ‘hidden with Christ in God’?

4. Why does Paul place the command to put sin to death after declaring that believers have been raised with Christ?

APPLICATION

5. Verse 4 says “when Christ who is your life appears, then you also will appear with him in glory.” How does this future hope shape the way you actually live your present, hidden life right now?

6. Practically, what does it look like this week to “seek the things that are above” without becoming so heavenly-minded that you neglect ordinary faithfulness where you are?

Billings Ch. 2, “Conclusion”

1. In his conclusion, Billings returns to John 15:5 (“apart from me you can do nothing”) as the anchor for the whole chapter. How does he summarize the relationship between “total depravity” and “total communion” as two sides of one coin?

2. Billings closes the chapter by quoting Colossians 2:13 — “you were dead in trespasses ... God made you alive together with him [Christ].” How does this verse capture both halves of the “double grace” Billings has traced across this whole chapter?

3. Where have you experienced grace enabling your will rather than coercing you or diminishing your agency?

4. As you close this two-chapter unit and move further into Union with Christ, what's one specific way seeing Reformed theology as fundamentally about "total communion" rather than only "total depravity" could reshape how you disciple, mentor, or lead others toward Christ?

Week 12

Ephesians 3:1–13 and Billings, “Communion with God in Calvin in Light of Modern Theology and Spirituality”

Ephesians 3:1–13

OBSERVATION

1. Paul calls himself a “prisoner for Christ Jesus on behalf of you Gentiles” and speaks of a “mystery” made known to him by revelation. What is this mystery, according to the passage?
2. Trace Paul’s description of his ministry and the church’s role in verses 2–10. What is made known, who makes it known, and to whom?

INTERPRETATION

3. What is striking about God displaying his wisdom through the church even to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places?
4. Paul calls himself “the very least of all the saints” yet entrusted with this grace. How does Paul hold together deep humility and enormous privilege/calling in this passage?

APPLICATION

5. Paul's access to "boldness and confidence" in approaching God comes "through faith in him" (Christ). Where in your life do you find yourself timid or hesitant in approaching God, and how might this passage address that?

6. Where do you need to remember that suffering borne in faith is not meaningless within God's larger purpose?

Billings Ch. 3, "Communion with God in Calvin in Light of Modern Theology and Spirituality"

1. Billings opens by cataloging modern critiques of Calvin (Radical Orthodoxy, Catherine Pickstock, Kilian McDonnell, Anna Case-Winters, Joseph Farrell). What is the common charge these critics level against Calvin's theology of God and humanity?

2. Billings worries that emphasizing "union with God" today can put Calvin in a "motley crew" alongside panentheists, young evangelicals who talk about "dating Jesus," and spiritual-but-not-religious mysticism. What is his concern about this kind of language?

3. Where have you encountered the false choice between a distant God and a close but manageable God?

4. In discipling others, are you more likely to present God as overly casual and manageable or overly distant and abstract? How could you hold together his mystery and nearness in Christ?

5. How could you hold together reverence for God's otherness and confidence in his nearness in Christ this week?

Week 13

Ephesians 3:14–21 and Billings, “Accommodation and Knowledge of God: Communion with the Incomprehensible God in Calvin”

Ephesians 3:14–21

OBSERVATION

1. Paul bows his knees to the Father and prays that believers would be strengthened “with power through his Spirit in your inner being,” that Christ may dwell in their hearts through faith. What three things does Paul pray believers will be able to do (vv. 17-19)?

2. This prayer repeats words for power/ability (“strengthened,” “comprehend,” “know,” “able to do”) and for love (“rooted... in love,” “breadth, length, height, and depth,” “love that surpasses knowledge”) several times. List every occurrence of power/ability language and every occurrence of love language in verses 16-20. What do you notice about how these two threads interweave?

INTERPRETATION

3. Paul prays that believers would know a love that “surpasses knowledge” (v. 19). How can something be simultaneously knowable and surpass knowledge?

4. Paul's prayer moves from inner strengthening, to Christ dwelling in the heart, to being rooted in love, to grasping Christ's love's dimensions, to being “filled with all the fullness of God.” Why do you think Paul builds the prayer in this order rather than starting with theological knowledge?

APPLICATION

5. Where in your life do you need to pray for inner strength to grasp more of Christ's love, rather than simply trying to accumulate more information about God?

6. The doxology (vv. 20-21) praises God who is “able to do far more abundantly than all that we ask or think, according to the power at work within us.” Where in your own life, hopes, or plans for future discipleship or leadership are you asking or thinking too small, compared to the power already at work in you through your union with Christ?

Billings Ch. 3, “Accommodation and Knowledge of God: Communion with the Incomprehensible God in Calvin”

1. According to Billings, what four purposes does Calvin's language of “accommodation” serve across his writings?

2. Billings highlights Calvin's image (from the 1539 Institutes) of God “lispering” or “babbling” (balbutire) to us like a nurse speaking to an infant. What is Calvin's point in using this image, and what does David Wright mean by saying accommodation “both reveals and conceals”?

3. Why does Calvin believe Christ's mediation is necessary not only for forgiveness but also for knowing and approaching God?

4. Calvin compares accommodation to a nurse speaking to an infant. How might you imitate this patience when discipling someone who cannot grasp everything at once?

5. Where are you hesitant to approach God? How might remembering Christ's mediation change the way you pray?

Week 14

1 Corinthians 6:17 and Billings, "Between Deism and Pantheism: Communion with the Incomprehensible God in Bavinck"

1 Corinthians 6:17 (key passage)

OBSERVATION

1. Paul writes this verse in the context of warning against sexual immorality, contrasting union with a prostitute ("one flesh," quoting Genesis) with union with the Lord. What does Paul say happens when someone is joined to the Lord?

2. This passage stacks up three body/union images in quick succession: "your bodies are members of Christ" (v.15), the "one flesh" union quoted from Genesis (v.16), and being "one spirit with him" (v.17). List these three images in the order Paul presents them.

INTERPRETATION

3. In the surrounding argument of 1 Corinthians 6:12–20, why does union with the Lord matter for choices involving the body?

4. What does Paul communicate by contrasting becoming 'one flesh' with another person and being 'one spirit' with the Lord?

APPLICATION

5. This is a striking, almost startling claim — that you are “one spirit” with the Lord. How should this truth shape the everyday choices you make with your body, time, and attention, beyond just sexual ethics?

6. Paul's logic is that because you are “one spirit” with the Lord, involving your body in sin drags that union into something contrary to Christ's holiness, since ‘your body is a member of Christ’ and ‘a temple of the Holy Spirit’ (vv. 15, 19). Where in your life right now — not necessarily sexually, but in any area — do you find yourself treating your body (or time, or attention) as your own autonomous property rather than as united to Christ? What would it look like to live this week as someone who is, in fact, one spirit with him?

Billings Ch. 3, “Between Deism and Pantheism: Communion with the Incomprehensible God in Bavinck”

1. According to Billings, Bavinck frames his doctrine of divine incomprehensibility and communion as an alternative to two errors of his day. What are they?

2. Bavinck says, “[God] cannot fully impart himself to creatures. For that to be possible they themselves would have to be divine.” How does Bavinck use this claim to argue that divine incomprehensibility is not a threat to communion with God but actually its precondition?

3. Why might an incomprehensible God be a more satisfying object of worship and love than a God we could fully understand?

4. Where do you seek certainty or control in your relationship with God? How might accepting your creaturely limits deepen your communion with him?

Week 15

1 Corinthians 13:12 and Billings, "A Contrast between Calvin and Bavinck: The Beatific Vision, the Incarnation, and Accommodation"

1 Corinthians 13:12 (key passage)

OBSERVATION

1. Paul contrasts two states of knowing in this verse. List exactly what characterizes the "now" and what characterizes the "then."

2. What does Paul say about the relationship between how fully we will know and how fully we are already known by God?

INTERPRETATION

3. Read 1 Corinthians 13:8–13. What contrasts does Paul draw between present knowledge and future knowledge?

4. What might 'face to face' communicate about future fellowship with God? What does this verse leave unexplained?

APPLICATION

5. Where in your life right now do you feel the frustration of only knowing “in part” — a situation, a relationship, or a question about God you wish you could see clearly right now but can't?

6. How does the promise that you are already “fully known” by God — even before you fully know him — change how you feel about approaching God with the parts of yourself you'd rather keep hidden or unexamined?

Billings Ch. 3, “A Contrast between Calvin and Bavinck: The Beatific Vision, the Incarnation, and Accommodation”

1. According to Muller and Doyle, what did Moltmann and Van Ruler wrongly conclude from Calvin's comments on Christ delivering the kingdom to the Father?

2. Muller argues that our infirmity—not Christ's humanity—is removed as a veil. How does this differ from saying Christ's humanity becomes unnecessary?

3. When you imagine eternity, does Christ remain at the center, or does he become merely a means to 'seeing God'? How might this chapter reshape your hope?

4. Why does the question of Christ's continuing humanity in glory matter pastorally? Where else have you seen an apparently abstract doctrine affect Christian life?

Week 16

Psalm 139:1-18 and Billings, "A Distinction to Preserve Divine Mystery: Archetypal and Ectypal Theology" and "Closing Thoughts"

Psalm 139:1-18 (key passage)

OBSERVATION

1. List the specific everyday activities of the psalmist that God is said to know in verses 1-3.
2. In verses 7-12, the psalmist asks where he could flee from God's Spirit or presence, then lists specific places. What does he conclude about each of these places?

INTERPRETATION

3. How does Psalm 139 hold together God's incomprehensible knowledge and his intimate knowledge of the psalmist?
4. Trace the movement from God's knowledge, to his presence, to his formation of the psalmist, and finally to worship. Why might the psalm unfold in this order?

APPLICATION

5. Where do you resist the idea that God knows the small, ordinary details of your life — do you tend to think of God's attention as reserved only for “big” moral or spiritual matters?

6. Is there a place, situation, or even a part of your own heart where you've assumed God's presence doesn't reach — and how does this psalm's repeated “you are there” address that assumption?

Billings Ch. 3, “A Distinction to Preserve Divine Mystery: Archetypal and Ectypal Theology” and “Closing Thoughts”

1. Billings traces the clear archetypal/ectypal distinction to the Reformed scholastic Franciscus Junius. In Junius's scheme, what are the three forms of ectypal (creaturely) knowledge of God?

2. In his closing story, Billings recounts a student who said he disliked God's “negative attributes” (incomprehensibility, limitlessness) because they make God “seem distant,” preferring only the “positive attributes.” How does Billings use Psalm 139 to respond to this student's objection?

3. If future fellowship with God will still depend on God's condescending love in Christ, how does that challenge the desire for a God without mystery?

4. How has this study of mystery and accommodation changed your view of God or your prayer life? What practice do you want to continue?

5. Junius calls our present knowledge 'pilgrim theology': sufficient for our present life, though still partial. How does this reshape your expectations for spiritual maturity?

Week 17

Ephesians 4:1–16 and Billings, “Justice and the Gospel in North American Congregations”

Ephesians 4:1–16

OBSERVATION

1. Ephesians 4:4–6 piles up a string of “ones” — one body, one Spirit, one hope, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all. List each “one” in the order Paul gives them, and note which person of the Trinity each is attached to (Spirit, v. 4; Lord, v. 5; God and Father, v. 6).

2. According to verses 11–13, list the specific gifts/offices Christ gives to the church (apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors and teachers) and the goals Paul states these gifts are given to accomplish.

INTERPRETATION

3. Verses 15–16 describe the church growing “in every way into him who is the head, into Christ,” with the whole body “joined and held together” by him. How does this explicit language of growing into Christ reframe the “one body” language from verses 4–6 — is the church's unity ultimately a shared project believers build, or a shared union with Christ they're joined into and grow up within?

4. Why does Paul ground his exhortations to humility, patience, and unity in the calling believers have already received?

APPLICATION

5. Where in your own small group or church life do you see the “unity of the Spirit” being actively maintained (v. 3) — through patience, humility, gentleness — and where do you find that harder to practice?

6. Verse 13 describes maturity as growing toward “the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ,” something the whole body reaches together, not alone. Whatever gift or role you have (however small it feels), what's one specific way you could invest it in another person's growth this month?

Billings Ch. 4, “Justice and the Gospel in North American Congregations”

1. What examples does Billings give of the religious right and left invoking justice in the 2008 election? What deeper question about justice does he raise?

2. Billings cites sociological studies showing that mainline/liberal churches that emphasize social justice rhetoric most tend to show less concrete commitment (e.g., giving) to the poor than evangelical churches. Why might this irony occur, according to the chapter?

3. On the other side, how does Billings describe the way evangelical churches typically relate justice to the gospel? What critique does Mark Galli offer about the motivations evangelicals often use?

4. Before we go further into this chapter, where have you personally seen justice treated as either “optional extra credit” or as “the whole gospel” — in your own church background, your own thinking, or in the broader Christian world you observe?

5. Think of a past experience of service, missions, or justice work. Was your motivation closer to guilt or gratitude? How might grace reshape it?

Week 18

Ephesians 4:17–24 and Billings, “The Eucharistic Gospel and Justice in South Africa: Critically Retrieving the Belhar Confession”

Ephesians 4:17–24

OBSERVATION

1. Paul says the Ephesians must no longer walk “as the Gentiles do, in the futility of their minds” (v. 17). List everything he says characterizes this old way of life in verses 18–19 (in terms of understanding, feeling, and behavior).

2. List what Paul says about the “old self” (v. 22) and the “new self” (v. 24) side by side — what is the old self “corrupted” by, and what is the new self “created” after? What single passage from Genesis does “created after the likeness of God” echo?

INTERPRETATION

3. Verse 20 says, “But that is not the way you learned Christ!”, and verse 21 adds that believers “were taught in him, as the truth is in Jesus.” What does it mean that Paul describes this teaching as happening “in him” and locates truth itself “in Jesus,” rather than simply saying believers learned facts about Jesus?

4. This passage roots ethical transformation in truth (“as the truth is in Jesus,” v. 21) and in being “renewed in the spirit of your minds” (v. 23). Why might Paul insist that the mind, and not just outward behavior, needs renewal for genuine change to happen?

APPLICATION

5. Where do you notice “futile thinking” or old patterns of desire still shaping your own decisions, even after years of walking with Christ? What would it look like practically to be “renewed in the spirit of your mind” in that area this year?

6. Renewal of the mind, per this passage, is an ongoing process, not a one-time event. As you think about your own growth over the next several years — including any future role discipling or leading others — what's one practical rhythm (Scripture, prayer, honest accountability) that could help keep your mind being actively renewed in the area you just named?

Billings Ch. 4, “The Eucharistic Gospel and Justice in South Africa: Critically Retrieving the Belhar Confession”

1. How did the 1857 decision about separate Communion eventually contribute to separate denominations and a theology supporting apartheid? What warning does this history offer?

2. Why does Billings believe American Christians cannot treat South African church segregation as someone else’s history?

3. The 1983 koinonia ministry brought people of different races together for meals. What does its example suggest about the connection between the Lord's Table and ordinary shared life?

4. Where have you seen a small, well-intentioned compromise on biblical practice harden into something larger? What made it difficult to recognize or resist?

5. What safeguard could help keep pastoral flexibility from overriding clear biblical or theological convictions in your future leadership?

Week 19

Ephesians 4:25–32 and Billings, “Relating Justice to Union with Christ”

Ephesians 4:25–32

OBSERVATION

1. List the commands in verses 25–32. Which commands put away an old practice, and which replace it with a new one?
2. Verse 28 says the thief must not only stop stealing but must “labor, doing honest work with his own hands, so that he may have something to share with anyone in need.” What does Paul explicitly state as the purpose of the thief's honest labor?

INTERPRETATION

3. Paul closes with, “Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you” (v. 32). How does grounding forgiveness specifically “in Christ” — rather than simply “as God forgave you” — change the nature or source of the forgiveness expected of us?
4. Each of these put-off/put-on commands is grounded in verse 25's reasoning, “for we are members one of another.” What common thread runs through all of these commands, given that corporate reasoning?

APPLICATION

5. Verse 30 warns, “do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, by whom you were sealed for the day of redemption” — placed right in the middle of this list of relational commands. What does it mean to you that sins like bitterness, slander, and unresolved anger are described as grieving the Spirit specifically?

6. Of all the put-off/put-on pairs in this passage — falsehood and truth, stealing and generosity, corrupting talk and edifying speech, bitterness and kindness — which one is the area you most need the Spirit's help in right now? As you look toward taking on more responsibility or leadership in your community, what's one practical step you'd want to take in that area?

Billings Ch. 4, “Relating Justice to Union with Christ”

1. Billings summarizes Calvin's view of the gospel as the “double grace” of justification and sanctification — “inseparable yet distinct,” both received by the Spirit in union with Christ. Why does Calvin insist these two graces cannot be separated, even though justification is not “through works”?

2. Billings is careful to say the “new life” of sanctification does not make our works “the ground or content of the gospel.” How does he use Romans 6:1-3 (Paul's response to “should we continue in sin that grace may abound?”) to make this point?

3. How would you explain that justice and good works are inseparable from salvation but never the grounds of salvation?

4. Where do you treat good works either as optional 'extra credit' or as something you must produce to remain right with God?

5. How central is the Lord's Supper to your spiritual life? How might you approach Communion as a gift that forms you in justice and love?

Week 20

1 Corinthians 11:23–26 and Billings, “The Lord's Supper and the Law of Love”

1 Corinthians 11:23–26 (key passage, the Lord's Supper)

OBSERVATION

1. This account frames the whole tradition with Paul saying he “received from the Lord” what he also “delivered” to the Corinthians (v. 23), and it repeats the instruction “do this in remembrance of me” after both the bread (v. 24) and the cup (v. 25). What do you notice about how carefully and deliberately this tradition is being handed down?
2. List the specific actions Jesus takes with the bread (vv. 23-24) and then with the cup (v. 25) — taking, giving thanks, breaking, speaking. What do you notice about the parallel structure between the two halves of the meal?

INTERPRETATION

3. Jesus says of the bread, “This is my body, which is for you,” and of the cup, “This cup is the new covenant in my blood.” What does it mean that believers are invited to participate in Christ's own body and blood at this meal, and how is this a picture of union with Christ that words alone couldn't fully convey?
4. This passage comes in the middle of Paul correcting the Corinthians for divisions and self-centered behavior at their common meals (see 1 Cor. 11:17-22, 33-34). How does knowing that a fractured, unequal congregation is being corrected with these very words change how you read verses 23-26 — especially given that this meal is meant to unite believers as one body in Christ?

APPLICATION

5. Verse 26 says that eating and drinking “proclaims the Lord's death until he comes” — the meal itself preaches the gospel through action, to the gathered church and to one another. How does remembering that Communion is meant to “proclaim” something shape the way you personally approach it — as a private moment of introspection only, a corporate act, or both?

6. As you think about your own future faithfulness — whether as an elder, deacon, parent, or small group leader someday — what is one concrete way you could help your own church or group experience the Table as the unified, cross-difference meal Paul describes, rather than only a moment of private introspection?

Billings Ch. 4, “The Lord's Supper and the Law of Love” (“A View from the Garden” and “A View from the Table”)

1. According to Billings and Calvin, how does Adam's restriction from the tree of knowledge show that God's law was meant to unite humanity to God?

2. What difference does it make to view and love a difficult neighbor ‘in God’ rather than merely as that person appears to us?

3. How might receiving the Supper as a sacrifice of thanksgiving reshape your posture toward people you struggle to love?

4. Whose pain in your church or group have you been slow to share? How might your union with Christ change the way you respond?

5. As you prepare for Communion, what expression of gratitude or commitment to unity do you want to bring to the Table?

Week 21

Matthew 5:43-48 and Billings, "Justice in the Eucharistic Gospel" and "Living a Justice Defined by Jesus Christ"

Matthew 5:43-48 (key passage)

OBSERVATION

1. Jesus quotes a common teaching ("love your neighbor and hate your enemy") and then contrasts it with his own command. What exactly does Jesus command instead (v. 44)?
2. What reason does Jesus give (vv. 45-47) for why loving only those who love you back isn't praiseworthy, using the examples of tax collectors and Gentiles?

INTERPRETATION

3. How does God's generosity toward both the evil and the good shape Jesus' command to love enemies?
4. In this context, what does Jesus mean by 'perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect'? How does the surrounding command to love enemies guide your answer?

APPLICATION

5. Who is a specific person in your life right now who functions as an “enemy” — someone who has wronged you, opposes you, or whom you find genuinely difficult to love? What would it look like to pray for them this week, specifically, by name?

6. Where have you settled for a general desire to be good rather than Jesus’ specific command to love and pray for an actual enemy?

Billings Ch. 4, “Justice in the Eucharistic Gospel” and “Living a Justice Defined by Jesus Christ”

1. What does Billings mean when he calls Christian justice ‘derivative, even parasitic’ on Christ? Why is the phrase intentional rather than negative?

2. How does Billings avoid reducing the gospel to acts of justice while also rejecting the idea that justice is optional?

3. What would it look like for your church or group to pursue justice together with worship, Bible study, and witness rather than as a separate program?

4. What practice could keep your understanding of justice rooted in Christ rather than allowing it to become an independent cause?

5. Where do you want Scripture to provide a more detailed political roadmap than it does? How do you respond when Scripture is less specific than you would like?

Week 22

Matthew 25:31-40 and Billings, "The Place of the Wounded Body" and the Belhar Confession appendix text

Matthew 25:31-40 (key passage)

OBSERVATION

1. List every specific need mentioned that the "sheep" met for others.

2. When the righteous ("sheep") respond to the king's commendation, what do they say they don't remember doing (vv. 37-39)? What does this suggest about their awareness of their own actions?

INTERPRETATION

3. What does Jesus mean when he says, 'as you did it to one of the least of these my brothers, you did it to me'?

4. What might the surprise of the righteous in verses 37–39 reveal about the character of their service?

APPLICATION

5. Of the specific needs named in this passage (hunger, thirst, being a stranger, nakedness, sickness, imprisonment), which one do you have the least practical contact with in your current life — and what would it look like to move toward that kind of need this year?

6. Where are you tempted to serve for recognition or spiritual credit rather than from genuine love of neighbor?

Billings Ch. 4, “The Place of the Wounded Body” and the Belhar Confession appendix

1. Why must communion with Christ, with fellow believers, and with the wounded neighbor be distinguished without being separated?

2. How does Billings keep Christ at the center of the Supper while preserving its implications for unity and care for those in need?

3. Is there a specific neighbor in need whom this chapter invites you to notice and serve? What response might faithfulness require?

4. Thinking about your own church community rather than society at large: in what small, concrete way might your own posture toward the poor or excluded need to change if you truly held together, as Billings urges, communion with Christ and communion with the neighbor in need?

Week 23

Ephesians 5:1–14 and Billings Ch. 5, “A Typology of Incarnational Ministry” (Youth Ministry and Missional Church)

Ephesians 5:1–14

OBSERVATION

1. List the sins Paul names in verses 3–6 and the three qualities he calls the ‘fruit of light’ in verse 9.

2. Compare ‘you were darkness’ with ‘you are light in the Lord’ in verse 8. What change in identity does Paul describe?

INTERPRETATION

3. How does being ‘beloved children’ ground Paul’s commands to imitate God and walk in love?

4. What does the phrase ‘light in the Lord’ suggest about the source of the believer’s new identity and conduct?

APPLICATION

5. Paul says believers are called not just to avoid the sins he lists but to be light that “exposes” darkness (v.13) — light doesn't just avoid darkness, its presence drives darkness out. What would it look like for your presence in a friendship, workplace, or GraceGroup to actively expose sin like light, rather than just personally avoiding it?

6. As people who will likely disciple others in a GraceGroup, how does Paul's move from identity (“you are light in the Lord”) to imperative (“walk as children of light,” v.8) model healthy discipleship — as opposed to simply demanding moral change from people?

Billings Ch. 5, “A Typology of Incarnational Ministry” (“Youth Ministry” and “Missional Church”)

1. Billings quotes youth ministry writer Kenda Creasy Dean, who warns that “incarnational ministry” has been abused by leaders who say, in effect, “Follow me because I follow Jesus.” What does Dean say true incarnational ministry should say instead?

2. In the “Missional Church” section, Billings critiques Alan Hirsch's claim that “if God's central way of reaching the world was to incarnate himself in Jesus, then our way of reaching the world should be likewise incarnational.” What is Billings' core objection to this reasoning?

3. If you go on to lead a GraceGroup or disciple younger believers, where might you be tempted to think of yourself (even subtly) as “incarnating” Christ for someone rather than witnessing to him? What would it look like to correct that instinct?

4. How can describing a leader as ‘incarnating’ Christ create unhealthy dependence on that leader? What practice would keep attention centered on Christ?

Week 24

Ephesians 5:15–21 and Billings Ch. 5, “Cross-Cultural Mission”

Ephesians 5:15–21

OBSERVATION

1. List the actions connected with being ‘filled with the Spirit’ in verses 19–21: speaking, singing, giving thanks, and submitting. To whom is each action directed?
2. What two contrasting commands does Paul give in verse 18 concerning drunkenness and being filled with the Spirit?

INTERPRETATION

3. What does it mean to give thanks ‘in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ’?
4. Why does Paul describe Spirit-filled life through shared worship, thanksgiving, and mutual submission rather than private experience alone?

APPLICATION

5. Paul commands “look carefully then how you walk, not as unwise but as wise, making the best use of the time, because the days are evil” (vv.15-16). What is one area of your schedule or habits where you are currently drifting rather than walking wisely, and what would it look like this week to reclaim that time for Christ?

6. Giving thanks “always and for everything” (v.20) is a tall order. As someone who may lead others through hard seasons, how do you distinguish gratitude that's genuinely Spirit-filled from gratitude that's forced positivity or denial of real pain?

Billings Ch. 5, “Cross-Cultural Mission”

1. Billings critiques Sherwood Lingenfelter's widely used missiology textbook, which portrays Jesus as a “200 percent person” (100% God, 100% Jew) who models an “incarnation process” missionaries should undergo to become “150 percent persons.” What two doctrinal problems does Billings identify with this framework?

2. What does Billings affirm as legitimate and valuable in Lingenfelter's concerns, even as he rejects the incarnational analogy itself?

3. As a future small-group leader entering unfamiliar “cultures” (a new generation, a hurting family, a person very different from you), how might Billings' critique change how you talk about “meeting people where they are”?

4. When serving across cultural, generational, or economic differences, what habit could help you resist the ‘messiah complex’ Billings describes?

Week 25

2 Corinthians 5:17–21 and Billings Ch. 5, “What Should Be Imitated in Philippians 2:1–11?”

2 Corinthians 5:17–21 (key passage)

OBSERVATION

1. List each phrase in verses 17–21 that connects new creation, reconciliation, or righteousness to Christ.

2. In verse 20, who makes the appeal, who speaks, and whom do they represent?

INTERPRETATION

3. What does ‘new creation’ suggest about the scope of the change experienced by someone in Christ?

4. How does verse 21 connect Christ bearing sin with believers becoming God’s righteousness ‘in him’?

APPLICATION

5. Paul calls believers “ambassadors for Christ, God making his appeal through us” (v.20). If you are “Christ's ambassador,” entrusted with “the message of reconciliation,” how should that shape the way you disciple someone who is struggling with guilt or shame — what are you actually offering them?

6. Verse 18 says God “reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation.” Reconciliation is first something done TO us before it becomes a ministry entrusted to us. This week, who is one specific person you could extend a small act of reconciliation or peace-making toward, in light of the reconciliation you've already received?

Billings Ch. 5, “What Should Be Imitated in Philippians 2:1–11?”

1. Billings notes that advocates of incarnational ministry who cite Philippians 2 almost always stop quoting at verse 8 (the humiliation) and omit verses 9-11 (the exaltation). Why does he think this omission is a problem for their argument?

2. Even scholars in the “ethical” camp (like Peter O'Brien, Gordon Fee, and Stephen Fowl), who believe Christ is presented as an example, still say we cannot imitate one specific part of the hymn. What is that part, and why not?

3. Billings prefers the language of “conformity” to Christ's likeness over “imitation” of Christ. What's the theological difference he's drawing out between these two words?

4. Where have you tried to imitate Christlike humility through sheer effort? What might it mean instead to ask the Spirit to conform you to Christ?

5. When encouraging someone toward Christlike character, do you begin with their identity in Christ or with a command to obey? Which emphasis do you need to develop?

Week 26

Ephesians 5:22–33 and Billings Ch. 5, “A Theology of Ministry in Union with Christ the Servant”

Ephesians 5:22–33

OBSERVATION

1. List the specific actions Christ takes toward the church in vv.25-27 (loved, gave himself up, sanctified, cleansed, present to himself). What is the stated goal of all these actions, according to v.27?

2. Verse 30 says “we are members of his body.” Where else in this passage does Paul describe the closeness between Christ and the church using body/flesh language (see also vv.28-29, and the Genesis 2:24 quotation in v.31)?

INTERPRETATION

3. Paul quotes Genesis 2:24 (“the two shall become one flesh”) and then says, “This mystery is profound, and I am saying that it refers to Christ and the church” (vv.31-32). Why does Paul use human marriage to explain Christ and the church, rather than the reverse?

4. How do the instructions to wives and husbands differ, and how does Christ’s self-giving love govern the whole passage?

APPLICATION

5. How does Christ's sacrificial love challenge selfishness, coercion, and the misuse of authority in marriage or other relationships? This passage never licenses abuse or domineering control.

6. What would Christlike, sacrificial leadership look like in a relationship where you exercise influence or authority?

Billings Ch. 5, "A Theology of Ministry in Union with Christ the Servant"

1. Billings argues that instead of the incarnation as an abstract "pattern" for ministry, union with Christ offers something more concrete. What specifically does he say Christians are united to?

2. Billings writes that for incarnational ministry, "the pattern of becoming incarnate functions as an abstract pattern," but for union with Christ theology "it is more concrete." What does "concrete" mean here in contrast to "abstract"?

3. What concrete act of service from Jesus' life in the Gospels do you want to imitate this year?

4. What practical habit would help you keep Christ—not yourself—at the center when leading or discipling others?

Week 27

John 15:1–17 and Billings Ch. 5, “Revealing God's Lavish Love: The Lord Who Is a Servant in Jesus Christ”

John 15:1–17 (key passage)

OBSERVATION

1. Count the uses of ‘abide’ or ‘remain’ in verses 4–10. List what Jesus connects with abiding in him.

2. Identify the vine, the vinedresser, and the branches. What actions does Jesus attribute to each?

INTERPRETATION

3. What does the vine-and-branches image teach about the source of spiritual life and fruitfulness?

4. What does Jesus’ movement from calling the disciples servants to calling them friends reveal about their relationship with him?

APPLICATION

5. How might the Father's care as the vinedresser help you trust him during hardship, even when you cannot confidently explain why that hardship is happening?

6. As someone preparing to disciple others, how does the "abide, then bear fruit" pattern in this passage (rather than "produce fruit through effort") shape what you'll actually spend time doing with the people you lead?

Billings Ch. 5, "Revealing God's Lavish Love: The Lord Who Is a Servant in Jesus Christ"

1. Billings turns to Karl Barth's discussion (in Church Dogmatics 4/1) of Christ taking on not just human flesh in general, but specifically Jewish flesh as a "suffering servant." Why does Barth (and Billings) emphasize this particularity rather than speaking generally about "God becoming human"?

2. Billings quotes Barth: "God is always God even in His humiliation." Why is it theologically important, in Barth's view, that God remains fully God even while taking the form of a servant?

3. How might seeing Jesus as 'the Lord who is a servant' change your motivation for serving others?

4. Where do you resist weakness or try to appear more capable than you are? What might it mean to boast in weakness as Paul does?

Week 28

Ephesians 6:1–9 and Billings Ch. 5, “Participation Ministry as a Constructive Alternative to Incarnational Ministry”

Ephesians 6:1–9

OBSERVATION

1. List the two relationship pairs Paul addresses in verses 1–9. What phrases connect each relationship to the Lord?

2. What specific promise does Paul attach to the commandment to honor/obey parents (vv.2-3), and what does he call this commandment (v.2)?

INTERPRETATION

3. What does ‘in the Lord’ add to the command for children to obey their parents? What limits might that phrase place on obedience?

4. Across both relationship pairs, what changes when each person understands the Lord as the highest authority?

APPLICATION

5. Paul addresses bondservants and masters within an ancient system of slavery and places both under the same heavenly Master. What principles apply to present-day authority relationships, and where should we avoid treating modern employment as equivalent to slavery?

6. How would you counsel someone facing a difficult authority figure while making clear that obedience never requires participating in sin, concealing wrongdoing, or remaining silent about abuse?

Billings Ch. 5, “Participation Ministry as a Constructive Alternative to Incarnational Ministry”

1. Billings summarizes “participation ministry” as offering three practical advantages over incarnational ministry. What is the first — “realism about cultural difference” — and how does it avoid the trap he identifies in incarnational ministry?

2. Billings' third point is “witness to the transcendent Christ.” He writes that “our lives are not the good news, and we ourselves are not the good news.” What, then, does he say is the good news, and what is our role in relation to it?

3. Billings discusses the church as both “sent” and “gathered.” What weakness does he identify in many incarnational ministries regarding the “gathered” half of that pair?

4. Billings describes the church as both sent and gathered. Why does Christian ministry require both movements?

5. Do you naturally emphasize sending or gathering? What concrete practice would help you strengthen the side you tend to neglect?

Week 29

Ephesians 6:10–17 and Billings Ch. 5, “United to Christ the Servant: Christian Witness to Jesus Christ in Both Word and Life”

Ephesians 6:10–17 (the armor of God)

OBSERVATION

1. List every piece of armor in verses 14–17 and the action Paul associates with each one.
2. Only one piece of armor is explicitly called a weapon (“the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God,” v.17). What verb does Paul use to describe the overall goal of putting on this armor in verse 13 — is it to attack, or something else?

INTERPRETATION

3. Why does Paul begin with ‘be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his might’ before naming the armor?
4. What do the pieces of armor have in common? What do they suggest about the source of the believer’s strength?

APPLICATION

5. How does verse 12 keep you from treating another person as the ultimate enemy while still taking human sin, wrongdoing, and responsibility seriously?

6. As someone likely to walk with others through spiritual struggles or doubt, how would you help a fellow believer “put on” this armor practically, rather than just white-knuckling through temptation or discouragement?

Billings Ch. 5, “United to Christ the Servant: Christian Witness to Jesus Christ in Both Word and Life”

1. According to John 17:23, what feature of the church’s life shows the world that the Father sent Jesus? How does union with Christ make this witness possible?

2. What point does Billings draw from Ephesians 2 and Galatians 3 about Christian witness across cultural boundaries?

3. Why must Christian witness include both embodied faithfulness and verbal proclamation?

4. Do you more naturally demonstrate faith through your life or speak explicitly about Christ?
How could you grow in the weaker area?

5. Where do you see unity across genuine differences serving as a witness in your church?
Where is reconciliation still needed?

Week 30

1 Peter 2:9-10 and Billings Ch. 5, "The Indicative and the Imperative in Christ" and "Excursus: Ursinus on Participation in the One True Prophet, Priest, and King"

1 Peter 2:9-10 (key passage)

OBSERVATION

1. List every title Peter gives to believers collectively in verse 9.
2. What does Peter say is the purpose of believers being given this identity (the "that" clause in v. 9)?

INTERPRETATION

3. What do the titles 'chosen race,' 'royal priesthood,' and 'holy nation' reveal about the church's shared identity and calling?
4. How does the movement from 'not a people' to 'God's people' ground the church's unity and purpose?

APPLICATION

5. Of the four titles Peter gives believers (chosen race, royal priesthood, holy nation, people for his own possession), which one do you find hardest to actually believe is true of you personally — and why?

6. If your identity as part of a “royal priesthood” comes with the purpose of proclaiming God's excellencies (v. 9), what is one specific way you could “proclaim” what God has done in your life this week — to a friend, a family member, or in a future GraceGroup you might lead?

Billings Ch. 5, “The Indicative and the Imperative in Christ: Living by the Spirit in Gratitude” and “Excursus: Ursinus on Participation in the One True Prophet, Priest, and King”

1. Billings raises an objection to his own argument: given how divided the visible church is (denominations, splits, conflict), how can the “oneness” of Christ's body still motivate ministry? How does he answer this objection using Calvin?

2. Billings frames the “indicative” (you are one in Christ) as leading to the “imperative” (live into that oneness). What practical actions does he name as ways believers “live into” this oneness?

3. How would you explain to a new believer that the call to serve, teach, and pray flows from grace rather than from a need to prove worth?

4. Where do you need to remember that you already share in Christ's victory, even while the struggle continues?

5. Christians share in Christ's threefold office as prophet (speaking truth), priest (service and intercession), and king (resisting evil and encouraging faithfulness). Which role feels most natural to you, and where do you most need to grow?

Week 31

Ephesians 6:18–24 and Billings' Conclusion

Ephesians 6:18–24

OBSERVATION

1. List each element of Paul's closing benediction in vv.23-24 (what he wishes for them, and from whom it comes). Then flip back to Ephesians 1:2; what two elements does Paul's opening greeting share with this closing benediction?

2. What specific request does Paul make for himself in vv.19-20, and what detail does he mention about his own circumstances while making that request?

INTERPRETATION

3. How does the closing benediction echo the themes of grace, peace, faith, and life in Christ introduced at the beginning of Ephesians?

4. What is significant about Paul asking others to pray for his boldness while he is an ambassador in chains?

APPLICATION

5. Paul mentions sending Tychicus to update the Ephesians on his condition and to “encourage your hearts” (vv.21-22). What does this small, practical detail suggest about how Paul understood pastoral care — and what is one way you could offer that same kind of personal, practical encouragement to someone in your life this week?

6. Having now studied all of Ephesians, what single truth from the letter do you most want to carry into how you disciple or lead others going forward — and why?

Billings' Conclusion

1. What does Billings mean by a ‘theology of retrieval’? How can Christians from the past expose blind spots in contemporary theology and ministry?

2. Why does Billings insist that Christ—not our cultural identification—is the redeemer? What is pastorally at stake?

3. What common thread connects the book's treatment of adoption, total communion, divine mystery, justice, and ministry?

4. As you finish this year studying Ephesians alongside Billings, and prepare to possibly lead your own GraceGroup, what is the single biggest shift in how you think about "ministry" that this book has produced in you?

5. Looking back across this whole year of study — Ephesians alongside Billings — what is one specific practice (a way of praying, reading Scripture, or relating to others) that you want to carry forward into ordinary life now that the class is ending?

Week 32

Reread Galatians 2:20 & Ephesians 1; Prepare a Testimony

Reflection & Testimony Preparation

1. Reread Galatians 2:20 and Ephesians 1 together. Which single phrase from either passage feels most different to you now than it did back in September? Explain why.
2. Where in your life this year did you catch yourself living out of “moralistic therapeutic deism” (Week 3) rather than out of your adopted identity in Christ?
3. Of everything we've studied, adoption, total depravity/total communion, divine mystery, justice and the Lord's Supper, or union-with-Christ ministry, which chapter produced the most noticeable change in how you actually live, pray, or relate to others?
4. Prepare a short testimony for next week by answering these questions: What was a specific moment or season this year when “Christ living in me” (Gal 2:20) became more than a phrase to you? How has union with Christ reshaped your walk this year?

Week 33

Testimonies, Part 1 & Review Discussion

Testimonies & Review

1. What does union with Christ mean for how you disciple others?
2. As you listened to others' testimonies, what did you notice in common across different people's experiences of this year's study?
3. Billings' Chapter 5 argues that disciplers are witnesses to Christ, not people who “incarnate” Christ for someone else. Whose witness (a mentor, GraceGroup leader, or friend) has most shaped your own faith — and what did they actually point you toward?
4. Of the four Post-Grad pathways ahead of you (lead a GraceGroup, continue in Post-Grad, lead an evangelistic Bible study, or re-join a GraceGroup), how has this year's study shaped your sense of which is right for you next?

5. What's one practical next step (a conversation, a prayer, a commitment) you need to take this week regarding your next step in the discipleship pipeline?

