

**Bound & Determined, by Jeanene Reese**  
*Christian Men and Women in Partnership*

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### Churches That Lead the Way

Communities of faith that seek to engage the surrounding culture and empower women and men to serve together are not afraid to ask difficult questions of the text, of their culture, and of themselves. They examine and re-examine Scripture closely to determine how to apply it in their particular times and places. They interact with culture to find out both the needs of those around them and where God is already at work in the world. They scrutinize their own lives to see where God might be leading them and what gifts they have to serve and bless others.

They live like pioneers settling new territory, always anticipating what adventures as well as what dangers lie ahead. They live with hope, courage, faith, and confidence, seeking God's preferred future for their communities. These churches exhibit at least the following five perspectives.

1. *These churches understand that timing is everything.* Our family members say to one another frequently, "timing is everything." It is meant to give us pause, to buy time to think and reconsider. Or we use it to inform each other that a better moment might make it possible for us to really be heard. Too frequently, we do not pay enough attention to timing. We either forge ahead to take care of something, or we wait too long and miss valuable opportunities. But God does not make decisions as we do.

Rather, God has perfect timing. So when Gabriel is instructed by God to visit the young unmarried virgin Mary, God has planned the moment and the message carefully (Luke 1:26-38). God is breaking into history in a way that, although prophesied about, was not understood fully until after Jesus' death. Jesus comes to the earth into a specific context—he is born into a Jewish family and reared in the Jewish faith.

Throughout his public ministry, Jesus refers to a sense of timing that comes from the Father. For example, as the disciples are about to celebrate the festival of Booths, Jesus instructs them, "My time has not yet come, but your time is always here. The world cannot hate you, but it hates me because I testify against it that its works are evil. Go to the festival yourselves. I am not going to this festival, for my time has not yet fully come" (John 7:6-8). In other places in John's gospel, Jesus speaks of an appointed hour (7:30; 12:23, 27; 16:32) that is clearly associated with his death, burial, and resurrection.

What also becomes clear in Jesus' life and ministry, his crucifixion and resurrection, is that his ministry is not limited to the Jews. Although Jesus' earthly context was Jewish, his purpose included possible salvation

for all. God's perfect timing also reflects God's perfect love for the whole world (John 3:16).

For Christians interested in participating in God's work in the world, so many elements affect how we approach it. We realize that we live in a specific context. It is not a small thing for our churches to follow Christ's example in knowing not only *who* we are, but also *when* and *where* we are. Our purpose in being God's people at this time and this place, whatever that might be, allows us to think about the cultural moment in which we find ourselves and to live the gospel there.

The truth is, we must pay attention to these matters, or the church will not be a vibrant and living community for the next generation. Our teenage and adult children are begging us to stop arguing over what they consider insignificant issues while people around us go hungry and cannot find meaningful work. Many of our churches already are losing their young people in great numbers—I hear it everywhere I go. But these young people are not leaving the faith, just the institutional church. They are looking for communities that will be on the frontlines, working shoulder to shoulder, women and men, across racial, ethnic, and economic divides, all of us together to serve the needs and to bring the good news to those who need it most—the least of these. Such a commitment is why God sent Jesus into the world and why God sends us out as well.

2. *They wait for the Spirit.* A word that I have never liked and one I have struggled to live with at times: *wait*. So often, however, it is the word from the Lord for us. The instruction comes when we anticipate something really wonderful about to happen, when we are in the middle of a crisis and need help, or when we are challenged to make a decision and the timing seems urgent. *Wait*. "Wait? Lord that's not really an answer," I want to cry. *Wait?! "But we're running out of time, the deadline is looming,"* we want to remind God. *Wait*. "Wait for what Lord? I don't have enough patience to wait." And yet waiting is all too often the only response given.

Wait was the instruction Jesus gave followers at his ascension. And so they left Olivet and returned to Jerusalem and went to an upstairs room. A small group gathered, including the apostles, Jesus' mother Mary, and Jesus' brothers (Acts 1:12-14). So what were they waiting for? Jesus told them to wait until they received "power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth" (1:8). And so they waited.

Most of us, however, know the rest of the story. We know that on the day of Pentecost, they were once again gathered and heard the rush of a violent wind from heaven that filled the entire house where they were. Tongues like fire appeared among them and a tongue rested on each of them. "All were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages as the Spirit gave them ability" (Acts 2:1-4).

I have often heard reference made to Peter's preaching of Joel 2 about the Spirit being poured out on old and young, male and female, enslaved and free. But as a child I was also taught that only the apostles (that is, the men) had the gift of tongues for preaching. That is not how the text reads. Those who were gathered, those who had waited, all received the empowerment of the Spirit as Jesus had promised. Three thousand people were baptized that day, receiving forgiveness of their sins and the gift of the Holy Spirit.

We no longer have to wait for the outpouring of God's Spirit—it has been, is being, and will continue to be accomplished. Churches that recognize the Spirit in all their members will more naturally be inclined to look for and use the gifts given to each one. In fact, Ephesians 4 seems to indicate that the gifts are not actually given to specific individuals but rather these gifted people are given to the church for the good of all. The gifts are given "to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ" for promoting our growth in unity and maturity (4:12-13).

In Spirit-filled churches, partnerships are able to form without concern over issues of gender, age, race, or status. Members enrich

community life by their involvement in various combinations of ministry. Each member is valued as a person whom God has saved, sanctified, and empowered for the good of the Kingdom. Members use wisdom and discernment to help others determine their gifts and how they might bless others. Prayer is a constant activity in these churches and maturity is a natural outgrowth. Just as the first disciples who received the Spirit began to spread the good news and meet the needs of one another, so women and men today who are filled with the Spirit will work effectively together toward the same purposes.

3. *They recognize the importance of prayer.* The whole church was stricken at the news: Doris was admitted to the hospital in grave condition. The doctor gave her only a fifty percent chance of survival, and that was because he was a strong Christian. Immediately cards, letters, phone calls, and casseroles began to circulate. Paul, her husband, was a beloved and respected elder of the church. Doris was harder to describe. She was active in working with all children and teenagers. She was no bigger than an average ten year old herself, and it was not uncommon to find her in the middle of a large crowd of young people everywhere she went. People all over town knew and loved her. Everyone wanted her to recover, and the sooner, the better. (Our three children were at the top of that list.)

Jack and I had served this congregation for five years, he as the preacher and I as a leader of the women's ministry. Just a few weeks earlier, we informed the elders that we were leaving that summer for Jack to go into academics. The decision to go had been very difficult—something we prayed about not only for the sake of our family and future careers but also because of where we were in relation to the church. Although many good things happened during our tenure there, we somehow did not feel that our work was complete. And then Doris got sick.

The waiting room of the intensive care unit was crammed full of individuals anxious to see how Paul and Doris were doing. People kept

asking what they could do, and others kept responding, "All we can do now is pray." Have you ever thought about how we make that statement in desperate times? All we can do now is pray. It makes prayer seem like a last resort, as if we are resigned to a great inactivity that keeps us occupied, rather than the first step we should take in any situation. But at this time, the church really prayed.

Members set up prayer vigils at the hospital, with a team always present praying for the doctors, the nurses, and, of course, Doris and her family. The church held prayer meetings three times a day—morning, noon, and night—at the church building. People who could not be present at either of these were asked to keep prayer watches in their homes and were scheduled for prayer slots around the clock. We prayed, and prayed, and prayed for over a week. Men and women, young and old, strangers and close friends—we prayed like we had never prayed before.

That Sunday morning when Jack stood up to preach, he simply could not offer any words of wisdom or even comfort. Doris' condition remained the same. So eight hundred Christians dropped to their knees in prayer. The prayer that morning was more fervent and intense than I had ever heard. At that point, we did not know what God would do for Doris and Paul, but we certainly knew that God was changing the hearts of this group of Christians. God accomplished in that two-week period what Jack and I had hoped for and worked toward for the past five years.

Doris recovered. She lived for several more years and she and Paul continued their faithful service to many. Since that time the congregation has grown and flourished immeasurably; today, they are a healthy, vibrant, growing church. Jack and I, and our kids, were sad to leave that summer—we loved this body of believers—but we also left with gratitude, because this congregation was made up of a changed people. God used what seemed to be a crisis in our collective lives to bring us to our knees in humility, earnestness, and faith. We went from being a group of people who said, "all we can do now is pray," to a church who knew prayer was

the first and best activity we could undertake. I always wondered if Doris knew how God used her to change a whole community of faith.

4. *They value unity in diversity.* Imagine a gathering of the early church. I think of it this way: The host and hostess would welcome all who came and invite them into their home. Each person would bring an offering—perhaps a significant portion of the common meal or maybe just a single fish or loaf of bread. Others would sell property and bring the proceeds to share, while some might offer only a coin or two. The group would consist of an odd mixture of people, hardly those who would socialize with one another in the ancient world—Jews and Gentiles, rich and poor, slaves and masters, men and women, children and the aged. They worshipped the Lord with songs, prayers, and readings.

Those attending spoke words of encouragement and exhortation. Occasionally they would have word from one of the apostles or a traveling evangelist. The evening would culminate in a common meal, part of which celebrated Jesus' death, burial, and resurrection and gave them hope to continue living in a world hostile to their faith. They would leave carrying various offerings to those who could not come for worship or those who were in need.

Never before had people from such diverse backgrounds and different socio-economic levels found common ground in their faith. This incredible unity in the midst of such diversity was quite evident in the first churches but it was certainly not without problems. Read any of Paul's letters to various churches and you will see hints of disunity, disharmony, and disagreement.

None is more apparent than in the discord in Corinth. They were divided over which leaders were the greatest, how to conduct themselves sexually, who should settle legal disputes, whether they could eat meat sacrificed to idols, how women should serve in public ministry, and which spiritual gifts were the greatest. (And we think we've got new troubles in our congregations today.)

The apostle faithfully addresses each of these concerns and calls them to two radically Christian ideals. The first is a reminder that they are one body: "For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. For in the one Spirit we are all baptized into one body—Jews or Greeks, slaves or free—and we were all to drink of one Spirit" (1 Cor. 12:12–13). Paul further explains that no part of the body can say to another that it is not needed. He reminds them, and us, "God arranged the members in the body, each one of them, as God chose" (12:18).

All parts of the body are needed and valued and must be cared for. Paul reminds the Corinthians that if one part of the body suffers, the whole body suffers; if one member is honored, then all celebrate (12:26). God designed the church, like the physical body, to include widely differing members who are interdependent and unified in purpose. Churches that understand Paul's message about unity in diversity are more likely to foster meaningful and godly partnerships.

Paul's second radical ideal for Christians is that love trumps everything else. It is the spiritual gift given to all. It is the gift that shows fullness of life lived in Christ and the rich possibilities of our being together. Love allows adherents to be patient, kind, sacrificial, empathetic, and considerate of others—all qualities needed for members of the body to live and work in partnership. And best of all, love never ends nor does the potential for our growth and maturation in it. Imagine partnerships flourishing in churches like these.

5. *They handle conflict well.* The church at Philippi knew a lot about love. Many readers consider Paul's correspondence to this young congregation a love letter because of the numerous statements of affection he makes in it (1:7, 12; 2:12; 4:1, 8). It is also a book about partnership. Paul sees this church as his partner in the gospel (1:5, 14; 4:3, 15). Yet reading the whole epistle, one sees hints that all is not well, conflict is brewing just

under the surface, and the apostle wants to keep it from erupting into something more critical.

The first hint comes in chapter one, where Paul prays that their love may overflow with "knowledge and full insight" (1:9–11). He challenges them to look out for the interests of others, not just their own (2:4) and to not murmur or argue as they live together (2:14–15). In chapter four, he specifically challenges two women, Euodia and Syntyche, to "be of the same mind in the Lord" (4:2).

Throughout the epistle, Paul exhorts Christians, then and now, that only one thing really matters: that they live their lives "in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ" (1:27). To live with this perspective, according to Paul, is to stand firm together without being intimidated by those who would oppose them. Paul sees the inevitable suffering that comes with this kind of stance as equal to the privilege of believing in Christ (1:30). What enables believers to live in this type of radical unity is the sacrifice that Jesus made in humbling himself and becoming obedient to the point of death (2:6–11). Paul cites examples throughout Philippians of those who live sacrificially for the sake of others: Timothy, Epaphroditus, and even himself. It is only from the position of having counted everything he'd gained as loss (3:7–11) that Paul is able to stand faithfully with other believers and to demand that all Christians follow suit.

What becomes clear in this letter is that part of living out the Gospel is being able to stand with others, even when we disagree with them. Paul calls us to rejoice, to be gentle, to not worry, and to be thankful in prayer (4:4–6). Furthermore, we are to guard our thoughts, focusing only on good things and following the examples of those who live likewise, knowing that the God of peace will be with us (4:8–9).

Philippians helps us to see that in churches, even those in which members love each other deeply, conflict is inevitable. Working with one another in partnership for the gospel does not free us from conflict.

Instead, it infuses us with a desire to develop a plan for resolving it and a purpose in holding one another accountable to that plan.

Through my observations and experiences I have found these five attributes—understanding that timing is everything, waiting for the Spirit, recognizing the importance of prayer, valuing unity in diversity, and handling conflict well—are found in many healthy, thriving congregations. It is not surprising that when I speak to members of these churches, they report a high level of satisfaction with the spiritual nourishment they receive. It is not surprising that many individuals in these churches are involved in meaningful ministries that meet the needs of those in their community. It is not surprising that outsiders seem drawn to such vibrant churches. And it is not surprising that partnership in ministry between men and women is highly valued and encouraged in these faith communities.

So how does a congregation go about becoming such a leading church? The first step is to ask difficult questions of Scripture and to pray about what we discover there. Christians should never be afraid to reconsider any former interpretations or to discover whole new insights in the text. At the same time, prayer must be a central activity. Setting up prayer vigils, prayer teams, and prayer retreats are a few simple measures that can dramatically change the life of a church. We must also pay attention to direction from the Spirit, both in the congregation and in the surrounding area. Too often we assume that God is only at work in those who claim to be followers. Yet when we have eyes to see, we will discern the Spirit's movement in unexpected forms, in unexpected places, and within unexpected people.

Will these activities cause conflict in our midst? Yes—and we should welcome that conflict. Which churches in the New Testament had no conflict? The Corinthians? The Galatians? The Thessalonians? They were as filled with conflict as the church at Philippi. Our question should not be, how we can avoid conflict? but rather, how we can handle it well?

How, in the name of Jesus, can our communities of faith live together with all the diversity and challenges we face and still be faithful witnesses and godly servants in the world?



## Thoughts on Working Together

“Partnership in ministry implies that the partners show up ready to serve or work. Partners need to work with each other side-by-side at some point in their ministry so they can share the same struggles and hardships. One of the main components of making a team work well together is the camaraderie the players gain by struggling through two-a-day practices together. People who are partners in ministry go through rough times together to gain a mutual respect for each other. I think this is especially true for women in ministry. I feel that I have had to work twice as hard in ministry situations to gain respect, especially from my male partners.”

—Female Student



My prayer is that we will realize that the time is now. Christians are uniquely positioned to engage our culture in meaningful ways. I pray that we will not miss the opportunities presented to us. As the Civil Rights movement emerged in the 50s and grew into the 60s, too few Christians were found on the front lines. Too many chose to turn their faces from the racial inequities evident throughout our culture. Too many moved from the city to the suburbs to avoid living in racially diverse neighborhoods. Too many left integrated public schools and founded private Christian schools instead. These choices left a stain on Christianity. I pray that we will not repeat the mistakes of the past in relation to gender issues. As

faithful women and men, we need to lead the culture and the church in understanding the significance of godly partnership to fulfill God's purposes in the world.

## Conclusion

The opportunity Jack and I had to serve in a shared ministry didn't last long. We struggled to decide whether we would stay there or take the opportunity for him to teach at our alma mater. We knew that there were definite advantages and disadvantages to whichever direction we chose. Moving back to Texas meant we could be closer to family and expanded ministry opportunities for Jack. But what would I do? Could I find meaningful ministry? Would we be able to work together again?

After a few months in which Jack served as interim minister in a couple of congregations, we still had not found a church home. Honestly, we were looking for a place where our family could be fed but also where I might find employment. The latter possibilities were very limited.

One evening we were enjoying a meal with good friends and sharing our concerns and difficulties in these areas. One of these friends, David, turned to me and asked, "What is your vision of your ministry, Jeanene? What do you see yourself doing in the future?" I told him that I did not have such a vision nor any certainty about what it would be now or in the future. He said he found my answer odd, since he saw me as a visionary person. I told him that I had not dared dream about ministry but chose rather to take what was available.

"Why?" he asked.

"Because I love the church," was my response. "And I have never wanted to be disappointed with it or critical of it."

We closed the evening in prayer but it was as if a door to my heart had been opened, and I did not know what to think or do about it. Eventually, I discovered that I did have a vision of how I wanted to serve God and others—through preparing young men and women for ministry.

I pursued my advanced degrees and joined Jack and others in teaching in the College of Biblical Studies at Abilene Christian University.

But part of my response to David's question remains true. I do love the church, and I still do not want to be disappointed with it or critical of it. I hope that this chapter has demonstrated these sentiments. I pray that we have been challenged to think more creatively about culture, our involvement with it, and ways in which we can promote fuller lives of faith for all our members.