



# Core Values

## Week 5: Reflection

Brian Mattson - 08/31/2025

There's an old adage that's been used by a variety of people, notably Maya Angelou, and it sounds something like this: You can't know where you're going until you see where you've been. I like to think there's a lot of truth in that maxim. But there was a time in my life when I didn't really know where I was going because I didn't really know where I had been. In fact, at that specific moment in my life, I was a walking zombie. I could hardly tell up from down, awake from asleep.

Jessica and I had come to a breaking point. We were struggling with what to do or where to go. It wasn't job related weariness or spiritual confusion. It was that kind of very specific torture called sleep deprivation. I've never been to boot camp or experienced the toil of military training, but I can assure you that I have a keen awareness for what happens when you don't sleep.

Firstborns. What can I say?

We just celebrated Jack's 7th birthday last week. He's a great sleeper now, but for the first, oh, I don't know, 16 months of his life, he was not. And it wasn't just at nighttime. It was naps during the day too. We were lucky to get a 20-minute nap twice a day. Just enough time to get a shower or a bowl of cereal before he woke up crying. Like all first-time parents, we didn't really know what we were doing. We were confused and delirious. We were

frustrated. We wondered if something was wrong. Most people let us know that pretty much all new parents go through this. It's a stage. It will get better. That "stage" lasted a lot longer than we hoped.

It was probably around month ten when we reached our limits. We put Jack to bed one night and he slept for about an hour or so before he started crying again. Jess and I both looked at each other, exasperated. *Why is this happening again!* She started to cry, wondering what we were doing wrong. But I decided that this was my red line. I looked at her and said, "We aren't doing this. We need sleep." I reassured her that Jack was dry with a relatively new diaper on, he was fed, and he was clean. He had two parents that loved him in a warm house. He was going to be just fine. Then I got up, shut our door, and told her to put ear plugs in, because we are sleeping tonight.

And you know what? We did. Jack tired himself out and we actually got real rest. Do any of you parents out there remember the first time you just let your baby cry it out? It's pretty tough to do, but the reward that next morning was priceless. I thought about creating a business where I would hire myself out to first-time parents to care for the baby overnight once a month. I'd guarantee the baby's health and safety and let mom and dad sleep. I would've been a gazillionaire.

At about 18 months, we thought about baby #2. We reflected on our parenting journey thus far, the highs and lows, the sleep deprivation and the constant questions and concerns. We decided we wanted another baby in our family because, in the end, all the tough stuff was worth it. Plus, we had our own experience to look back on, to draw from—what worked and what didn't—which would make things a little easier to manage with Dorothy.

Reflection is one of our Core Values here at The Downtown Church because it's true, after all, that you can't know where you're going until you see where you've been. We want to always remember to look back at what has worked,

what hasn't worked, and make the necessary changes to create something better as we move forward as a church.

Here's how we defined it in 2014.

**Reflection: We will purposely take time to evaluate and reflect in our ministry as The Downtown Church both collectively and personally to remain open to the Holy Spirit's movement in and through us.**

Early on in The Downtown Church story, we started seeing young families show up. Young parents who were raised in churches, had drifted away, and were now wanting a healthy spiritual environment for their kids. The problem was, we didn't have many kids. Like four of them. We asked some of those first families to stick with us and we would plan and build something together.

And that's what happened. After a few more months and a few more families, we gathered them and asked what they wanted for their kids. Almost all of them referenced their own church experiences growing up. How they went to Sunday School with their peers and then "big church" with their parents. So we got busy. We found a few key volunteers, Ed & Pam Gwin, and we designed a Sunday School experience for those kids. The parents were excited. The church was excited. Not sure how the kids felt, but they didn't have much of a say. So in August of 2015, we launched our one-room Sunday School class for kids.

About 11 kids came that first month or so. There were some songs, some stories, snacks, and crafts. We were doing it! Exactly what those parents remembered doing when they were kids. And then we grew that thing right down to about two kids by November. Wait, what? This is what the parents said they wanted, so why wasn't it working.

Lori and I hit pause on our children's ministry. It was time to reflect and think about this some more. What wasn't working? Why wasn't it working? How do

we make it better? We gathered those parents again to diagnose the problem. They said they *thought* they wanted their kids to have the same experience as them, but in reality, nearly three hours at church was just too long.

The conversation was good and real. Was it a little disheartening that this new thing we started died on the vine? Yes it was. But by pausing and reflecting, rethinking and reimagining, we developed something better. The parents said they wanted something age-appropriate for their kids, but they also wanted them to experience some of the elements and rhythms of worship in an intergenerational setting. Had we not taken the time to reflect, we may have missed the chance to make something that lasts.

We got busy identifying a part-time Children's Coordinator. Kaitlyn Eagon helped us pick curriculum and design a shorter experience for kids during the sermon. The parents wanted the kids to sing the songs with the church, learn the prayers, and see the offering collected, but then have their own time upstairs where they could stretch their legs and voices. And it worked much better this time. In fact, that's how we still do it today.

Churches have a history of continuing to do things because *that's how we've always done them*. But is that the right reason? Some practices, like prayer, offerings, singing, and preaching are foundational to worship. But just exactly how those elements look and sound are open to changing with the times. Same with the events, classes, and studies. We want to do those things, but not the same ones over and over again.

In the years following Jesus' death and resurrection, Christianity was in its infancy, but that didn't mean it wasn't influenced by previous generations, other religions, or even the current political realities. These burgeoning communities were heavily influenced by their previous religious persuasions, as in heavily Jewish areas. That meant their specific flavor of this early Christianity was seasoned with Jewish perspectives, history, and customs.

They were Christians in the sense that they believed the Jesus story and followed the teachings as the way of salvation. But they still defaulted to their societal and cultural norms living out their faith.

Early writers and evangelists penned letters and taught these communities using strong Greek and Roman themes and influences from the current culture. Suffice it to say, there was a hodgepodge of beliefs that had to be sorted out over the next several centuries. There were these conflicting ideas about what it means to be a Christian, while also maintaining some of the strict laws from Torah. It was a confusing time, I'm sure, to keep everything straight.

In the New Testament book of Acts, Peter has this vision that sounds strange on the surface, but once he interprets the symbols and understands their meaning, it causes him to reflect. In this story, there is a Roman officer named Cornelius who is very devout. He has a vision to send for Peter, who was in another city nearby. While Cornelius' men are on their way Peter has this dream/vision/trance thing.

**About noon the next day... Peter went up on the roof to pray. He became hungry and wanted something to eat, and while it was being prepared he fell into a trance. He saw the heaven opened and something like a large sheet coming down, being lowered to the ground by its four corners. In it were all kinds of four-footed creatures and reptiles and birds of the air. Then he heard a voice saying, "Get up, Peter; kill and eat." But Peter said, "By no means, Lord, for I have never eaten anything that is profane or unclean." The voice said to him again, a second time, "What God has made clean, you must not call profane." This happened three times, and the thing was suddenly taken up to heaven.**

**- Acts 10:9-16**

Strange, right? The Greek word used to describe Peter's vision is the same one used in Genesis to describe Adam's deep sleep during the creation of woman and when God makes a covenant with Abram. My study bible explains it this way: A trance-like state allows God to communicate with a chosen one who is to carry forward the divine intent at a critical turning point. And that's exactly what Peter does. He carries the message of universal salvation for all people, and affirms that it isn't meant for the Jewish people only, but Gentiles as well. You and me today. All. People. So Peter acquiesces to Cornelius' invitation and goes with the messengers.

**And as he talked with him, he went in and found that many had assembled, and he said to them, "You yourselves know that it is improper for a Jew to associate with or to visit an outsider, but God has shown me that I should not call anyone profane or unclean.**

**- Acts 10:27-28**

Notice the reflection that is taking place by Peter listening to the will of God. He says upfront that it is against tradition and custom for Jewish people to associate with Gentiles, but that's the old way of doing things.

**Then Peter began to speak to them: "I truly understand that God shows no partiality, but in every people anyone who fears him and practices righteousness is acceptable to him."**

**- Acts 10:34-35**

Things are changing, and Peter is leading the way. But change is hard. Change ruffles feathers and threatens power. It can shake our foundations. We see that today, and Peter ran up against it as well.

**Now the apostles and the brothers and sisters who were in Judea heard that the gentiles had also accepted the word of God. So when Peter went up to Jerusalem, the circumcised believers criticized him, saying, "Why did you go to uncircumcised men and**

**eat with them?" Then Peter began to explain it to them, step by step.**

**- Acts 11:1-4**

These early Christians, once devout Jewish leaders, still drew clear lines about who could be a believer and what was expected. They believed in Jesus, but still clung to their previous laws. Peter went on to explain his vision of the animals and how Salvation through Jesus Christ was not meant for the Jewish people, but for all.

**If then God gave them the same gift that he gave us when we believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I that I could hinder God?" When they heard this, they were silenced. And they praised God, saying, "Then God has given even to the gentiles the repentance that leads to life."**

**- Acts 11:17-18**

Those early Christians fell into the mindset of *this is how we've always done things*. Even though God was doing a brand-new thing, they stuck with the old and familiar. Tradition for tradition's sake. Jesus told them, *I have not come to abolish the law and the prophets, but to fulfill them*. Jesus was giving them permission to reflect on the law and prophets, to think about what the words mean in new ways.

We follow in a long line of people reflecting on the word and will of God. It is an important exercise in a life of faith and in the life of the Church. When Lori and I got here in 2014, there was a nine-member choir. Four of them were paid. Was this the best use of time and funds? We needed to reflect on that question and ultimately decided to pause the choir. It wasn't right then, but maybe another time in the future. Maybe in the future it will become a not-choir-choir?

Again in 2014, while we were meeting with the Vision Team, we asked them: Does there need to be a church at the corner of Walnut & Jefferson anymore?

A tough question to wrestle with and reflect on. Through prayer, conversations, and dreams, we discerned that God did indeed want a church here. But not the same old church. Something new. Or at least something different.

Even now we are at a crossroads. What does it mean to be a church today, in these modern times, in a changing American landscape? Lori used to say the big-C Church is in constant need of reformation. She probably still says it, I hope. Because it's true. In our churches and in our own spirituality, we constantly need to make room for change as God does new things.

I invite you to spend some time reflecting on your own faith. How has it changed? How has it been strengthened? Where is it weaker? And reflect on the ways The Downtown Church can more closely follow God's will in this community and world. Perhaps that means we need to sunset something. Maybe we need to create something new, or increase our efforts somewhere else. God is constantly renewing creation, and if we are determined to stay the same, we very well may miss out on bigger and better things God has planned for us. God is making us new—me, each of you, all of us together—and reflecting helps us to keep up with that change as the spirit moves.