Church Inside Out

by

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

CHAPTER 1
Church Inside Out .......................................................... 5

CHAPTER 2
The Inward-Focused Church ............................................. 11

CHAPTER 3
Members Only ................................................................. 17

CHAPTER 4
Accentuating the Negative .............................................. 23

CHAPTER 5
Diplomatic Mission .......................................................... 31

CHAPTER 6
Who Is My Neighbor? ........................................................ 39

CHAPTER 7
Eating with Sinners ............................................................ 47

CHAPTER 8
A Life Like Lightning ........................................................ 53

CHAPTER 9
Preparing for Harvest ....................................................... 59

CHAPTER 10
A Son of Shalom ............................................................... 65

CHAPTER 11
Good News Is for Sharing .................................................. 71

CHAPTER 12
Citizens of the Kingdom .................................................... 77

CHAPTER 13
Being the Church, Inside and Out ................................... 85
Welcome to the study guide for *Church Inside Out*. This study guide contains thought questions about the ideas presented in the book, additional observations and commentary, and a proposed group study plan.

**As we begin**
As we begin this study, what do you hope to take away that you can use in your own life?

What do you hope to take away that you can use in your congregation?

**Cultural shifts**
Throughout the Bible, we see evidence of cultural shifts and changing religious attitudes. There were times when it was easy to be a follower of God; there were times when it was extremely difficult.

Foreign nations often dominated the Israelites and their land. These nations frequently made fun of the God of Israel and His inability to protect His people. Those times tended to turn people back to God. It was the times of prosperity that would lead God’s people to seek other gods, to want to imitate the peoples around them and join them in their worship.
Consider these examples:

Then a new king, to whom Joseph meant nothing, came to power in Egypt. “Look,” he said to his people, “the Israelites have become far too numerous for us. Come, we must deal shrewdly with them or they will become even more numerous and, if war breaks out, will join our enemies, fight against us and leave the country” (Exodus 1:8–10).

Joseph had risen to a position of power and authority in Egypt. He settled his family there, in an area where they could live quietly and worship God as they chose. But after his death, a new king came along who only knew that these foreigners were living in his land. God’s people entered into a long period of oppression at the hands of the Egyptians.

After that whole generation had been gathered to their ancestors, another generation grew up who knew neither the LORD nor what he had done for Israel. Then the Israelites did evil in the eyes of the LORD and served the Baals. They forsook the LORD, the God of their fathers, who had brought them out of Egypt ( Judges 2:10–12).

Throughout the book of Judges, God’s people run hot and cold. They forget God and begin worshiping other gods. God sends a foreign army to oppress them. They cry out to God, and God sends a deliverer. While the deliverer is alive, the people serve God. Once this hero dies, the people turn away from God, and the cycle starts over.

Then a voice said to him, “What are you doing here, Elijah?” He replied, “I have been very zealous for the LORD God Almighty. The Israelites have rejected your covenant, torn down your altars, and put your prophets to death with the sword. I am the only one left, and now they are trying to kill me too” (1 Kings 19:13–14).
Elijah lived in the time of King Ahab and his foreign wife, Queen Jezebel. Not only did Jezebel impose the religion of her people on the nation of Israel, but she also persecuted those who continued to worship God. Elijah was one of the few who were able to stand up to her, but he thought he was the only one. (God would let him know that there were still seven thousand others who remained faithful.)

Josiah removed all the detestable idols from all the territory belonging to the Israelites, and he had all who were present in Israel serve the LORD their God. As long as he lived, they did not fail to follow the LORD, the God of their ancestors (2 Chronicles 34:33).

Sometimes cultural shifts are for the good in the Bible. Here we see that Josiah led a religious reform that brought the nation of Israel back to God. He restored the temple, got rid of idols and pagan priests, and led the people to pledge themselves to fulfill the Law.

On that day a great persecution broke out against the church in Jerusalem, and all except the apostles were scattered throughout Judea and Samaria. Godly men buried Stephen and mourned deeply for him. But Saul began to destroy the church. Going from house to house, he dragged off men and women and put them in prison (Acts 8:1–3).

After the murder of Stephen, a strong time of persecution came against the church. Christians were arrested, and entire churches were threatened. Of course, God would later take care of the leader of this persecution, turning Saul into the Apostle Paul, one of the great champions of faith in the early church.
During all of these times of cultural change, God was still at work. Some of his greatest miracles happened during the time of Moses and that of Elijah. The time of persecution in the book of Acts allowed the church to expand beyond Jerusalem and Judea. The period of captivity strengthened the nation of Israel. The rise of the Roman Empire created the right conditions for the coming of the Messiah and the birth of the church.

God is at work today. Even as Christianity seems to be in decline in the U.S, God is doing great things through His church. We can choose to be a part of it or choose to peer out through the windows of our church building as others spread the kingdom.

How has the church’s role in society changed during your lifetime? What have you been able to observe?

Do you feel that society is more or less friendly to Christianity? Why do you feel that way?

What changes have you noticed in your community regarding religion?

Are there other major changes that have affected your church? (population growth or decline in your area, changes in makeup of population, new city ordinances, youth sports activities)
Look at the following list of challenges facing the church. Which do you see as being the most critical? (Rank them from 1 to 8)

_____ Lack of interest in the church among younger generations
_____ Doctrinal changes within the church
_____ Hostile attitude of society toward Christianity
_____ Rise of Islam and other religions
_____ General apathy among church members
_____ Pressures of life in our modern society
_____ Church members’ lack of biblical knowledge
_____ “Majoring in the minors”; church’s misplaced focus

What other challenges would you include?

Annual physical
As we begin discussing your congregation and its outreach to the surrounding community, let’s try to take some vital signs. Put an X in the box that best describes where you consider your church to be.

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<tr>
<th>MEMBERSHIP</th>
<th>Declining</th>
<th>About the same</th>
<th>Growing</th>
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<tr>
<th>ATTENDANCE</th>
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<th>Growing</th>
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<tr>
<th>AVERAGE AGE OF THE CONGREGATION</th>
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<th>LEVEL OF INVOLVEMENT OF MEMBERS</th>
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<th>Growing</th>
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<td>OUTREACH</td>
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<td>VISIBILITY IN THE COMMUNITY</td>
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<tr>
<td>INFLUENCE IN THE COMMUNITY</td>
<td>Declining</td>
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Remember that this is merely a description of how things are. It isn’t a reflection of what the church would like to be or what it’s going to be in the future.

When you go to the doctor, you see things as they are. You may want to weigh less and plan to lose weight; the numbers on the scale merely reflect where you are right now.

If you could miraculously improve one of the above areas, which one would you improve?

In which area(s) do you feel your church is already doing as well as it can?

Which of the areas do you feel will get worse if left unattended? Which areas will improve naturally if things stay as they are?

Before moving on, spend some time praying about your congregation’s current situation and prospects for the future.