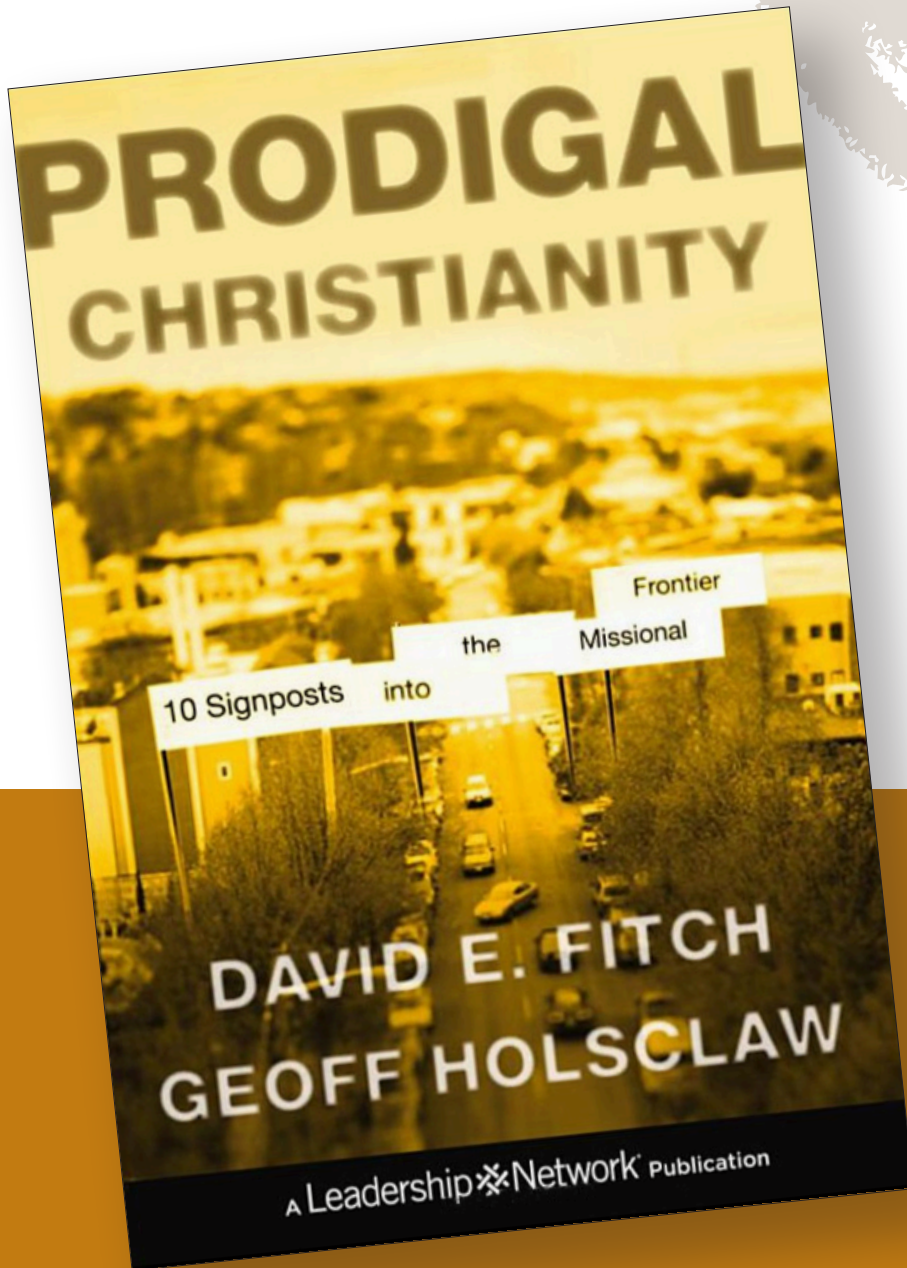


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PRODIGAL CHRISTIANITY

Prodigal Christianity | *David E. Fitch and Geoff Holsclaw*

Prodigal Christianity: 10 Signposts into the Missional Frontier
Jossey-Bass: San Francisco, CA, 2013. 190 pages.

In the familiar parable of the prodigal son (Luke 15:11-32), Jesus tells of a son going off “to the far country” and losing his inheritance through excessive and wasteful living. The outpouring of the love of the father on the prodigal son is a stunning picture of God loving us. We all know it well. It speaks to our relationship as sons and daughters of God our Father who has poured out his love on us through Jesus Christ.

The son is not the only prodigal character in the story. Tim Keller, pastor of Redeemer Presbyterian Church in New York, reminds us in his book *Prodigal God* that it is really the father who is the prodigal, celebrating the return of his son extravagantly, excessive and beyond all expectations. The father is the reckless one – reckless in grace.

German theologian Karl Barth suggests that to really understand this parable, we must read the journey of the prodigal son alongside the journey of another son: the Son of God. For Barth, the point of the parable is that God radically sends God’s own son into the far country to bring back all who are lost. The journey of the son reveals the true nature of the parable, expressing the radical missionary nature of God, that the Father has sent the Son into the far country to redeem the world.

Prodigal Christianity, by pastors David E. Fitch and Geoff Holsclaw, charts another way into the far country. It unfolds a Christian way of living that is determined by this prodigal nature of our God in Jesus Christ by the Spirit. That this journey changes everything is not an overstatement.

To be Christian is to learn to become prodigal.

This way of living is radical and generous and yet particularly defined as the way of God. This journey will break down the boundaries around the postmodern, post-Christian, sexually broken, relationally scarred, estranged, wandering, and marginalized peoples of our day. It will be a journey that takes us to the frontiers of God’s mission.

Signpost One: Post-Christendom

Into the Far Country: The Journey into Post-Christendom

In a culture that distrusts Christianity, a society that no longer sees the church as positive, why do we seek to attract people to come to us?

A shift into post-Christendom can best be understood by three “posts-”:

- Postattractational – There used to be a time when people gravitated toward the church; today, the church is more likely to repel people.
- Postpositional – The church no longer carries respect or influence; churches, pastors, and ordinary Christians must earn authority, and it has to be earned relationally.
- Postuniversal – Language and worldview are no longer universal to everybody we meet; as a result, we can no longer assume we are speaking the same language when we talk about Jesus, God, and sin in our neighborhoods.

Prodigal Christianity | *David E. Fitch and Geoff Holsclaw (cont'd)*

Accepting the Postattractational, Postpositional, and Postuniversal realities of mission in North America gives us an opportunity to learn again the prodigal nature of God, for the Triune God crosses all boundaries into our world of poverty and affliction in the son rather than merely attracting us by magnificent displays of power and glory.

These days, when our compasses are spinning, when our familiar routes are blocked and our maps are torn, the first signpost of post-Christendom directs us toward a prodigal Christianity that does not stand still in order to attract, does not sit in the seat of authority, and does not walk in the ways of the universal, but instead delights in the paths of the prodigal God.

Signpost Two: Missio Dei

With the Prodigal God: The Journey into God's Mission

Like many uprooted immigrants who set out for a new land, we are looking up at the distant stars for a direction. We want a north star to guide us. This hope of a fixed point to navigate by aptly summarizes what drives us amid the current confusions and misconceptions about God.

We may not think of God as the one who has invaded the world in the Son. Nor do we live as if God has remained active in the world through the Spirit. But we must get back to this place.

The second signpost, missio Dei, points us squarely into the middle of this world where God is, discerning where God is working, knowing that what God has done in the past continues into the present – not as something we must do but as something God is always already doing.

Signpost Three: Incarnation

On the Ground: The Journey into Everyday Life

In our society today, the neighborhoods we live in and the places we work, Jesus is pictured many ways: a sage, a wise man, a profound moral leader, even a revolutionary. But most people don't know how to say he is God.

In Luke 10, when we inhabit a neighborhood, eating and enjoying fellowship at a table, bringing peace and proclaiming the gospel, Jesus says "the one who hears you hears me, and the one who rejects you rejects me, and the one who rejects me rejects him who sent me" (Luke 10:16 ESV).

In a real way, then, even though we know the kingdom is already at work, the presence of Jesus is extended visibly through the proclaiming of the gospel by the sent ones. When we clothe the naked, visit the sick, or feed the hungry, when we are present alongside and with the poor, it is Jesus who is there present in this ministry.

These practices are not internal to the church as a nice and cozy country club, but are the very ways of entering the world as the Body of Christ.

Prodigal Christianity | *David E. Fitch and Geoff Holsclaw (cont'd)*

Signpost Four: Witness

Into the World: The Journey into the World

To be like Jesus is how we live in Jesus so that his kingdom becomes present and visible in and through us in the neighborhoods. More than a pronouncement of the truth or a conversation about the truth, the church is called to embody a witness to the truth.

With a broken and bankrupt world, how can we claim that God's kingdom has come? Is it really true that Jesus is Lord? Or is this merely a failed media campaign that is fading and eventually will be forgotten?

Prodigal Christianity is a life of witness characterized by two things. First, it is characterized by a testimony that points away from oneself to the works of Christ in our midst. Witness is about everyday attentiveness and faithfulness to God's kingdom that helps others learn to see it for themselves.

Second, witness is characterized by a shared life that embodies God's work among us. Witness takes shape as we live God's new creation, with reconciliation and justice as signs of the kingdom as it lies ahead for the whole world. Through our transformed lives, the world sees something it did not know was possible: it sees the kingdom breaking in.

Signpost Five: Scripture

Living Our Story: Journeying by the Book that is More than a Book

Following this signpost, prodigal Christianity affirms the authority of Scripture as the product of God's mission in Christ by the Spirit.

In a world where the church has lost its position of authority and influence, where people do not readily understand the world of the Bible, Scripture comes alive as it becomes the means to participate in God's life and mission.

We approach Scripture first not to analyze it or subject it to study as an object, but rather to allow ourselves to be immersed in it. It is a labor of love as we delve deeper into Scripture, allowing ourselves to see the whole world as it really is under the Lordship of Christ.

As prodigal Christians, we should rarely find ourselves defending the Bible's authority. Rather, its authority becomes undeniable when its compelling reality becomes visible among us. The story of God as displayed in a people speaks for itself.

Signpost Six: Gospel

Making All Things Right: The Journey into Redemption

Four On-ramps to the Kingdom:

- On-ramp 1: God is reconciling you in all your relationships
- On-ramp 2: God is at work
- On-ramp 3: God has put the power of sin to death and is calling you into life
- On-ramp 4: God is calling you into mission

Prodigal Christianity | *David E. Fitch and Geoff Holsclaw (cont'd)*

The gospel signpost must take us beyond being “justified by faith” before God. And it must take us beyond the “kingdom way” of God in the world. This signpost points us into new territory that is the very center of the world’s hurting and lost places. Here we are free to proclaim that Jesus, the crucified and risen Messiah, is Lord. Here Jesus comes into our dirty, confused, and troubled lives and seeks to establish his kingdom of life through the Spirit.

Signpost Seven: Church

In Kingdom Communities: The Journey as the Body of Christ into the World

The church does not merely have a mission. The church is not merely the product of mission. Rather, the church IS mission. In the same way that Jesus’s incarnation both proclaimed and made present the kingdom of God, so too the church proclaims and makes present the in-breaking of his kingdom. The church is nothing if not local, incarnational communities practicing the kingdom.

8 Essential Practices of the Church that Shape Life Together in Neighborhoods:

- Baptism
- The Lord’s Table
- Proclamation of the Gospel
- Reconciliation
- Being with People on the Fringes
- Being with the Children
- The Fivefold Ministry and Gifts
- Kingdom Prayer

Signpost Eight: Prodigal Relationships

With Our Brokenness: The Journey Toward Sexual Redemption

The local church should be the place of Christ’s in-breaking authority, the foretaste of God’s kingdom, and incarnational community, and the place where we gather to participate in God’s healing and renewal.

We need a signpost pointing us to the new places of the kingdom – spaces where we can experience God’s rule breaking into our sexual lives, where the Son’s work of transformation goes before us.

Here are a few directives for what the authors think these safe communities would look like in neighborhoods in the far country of our sexual culture.

- No labels – it makes no sense to broadcast public statements about what we are for or against before we have even begun to live with each other around these issues.
- We all come broken – these spaces must invite all people to enter by owning that we are together in our sexual brokenness.
- We gather to discern God’s voice in a welcoming and mutually transforming community that comes together to mutually discern the Scriptures for our time and place.
- We learn to become friends – the prodigal church must create spaces for the restoration of friendship at the core of our life together.
- We are called to something bigger – we need communities that witness a kingdom view of marriage and celibacy that is bigger than what passes for sexual life in North America.

Prodigal Christianity | *David E. Fitch and Geoff Holsclaw (cont'd)*

Signpost Nine: Prodigal Justice

Among Our Neighborhoods: The Journey Toward Local Justice

Living the gospel relationally with people as part of everyday life seems to be the common practice from which God's justice breaks in. In this way, in submission to his reign, Jesus's presence is extended incarnationally through our lives.

Here are three ways to follow the radical prodigal justice of the Son that moves into the neighborhood:

- We keep the relational in justice – God works for his righteousness through everyday relationships when we see things about everyday life we never would have seen apart from these friends.
- We enter from a posture of humility – when we come to be with a community, we never presume we already know what is needed.
- We bring Jesus – prodigal justice will always bring Jesus into the neighborhood. Whenever we are being with a person or situation, we are witnesses to the unique reconciliation and renewal made possible in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus.

Signpost Ten: Prodigal Openness

For the Good News: The Journey into Diverse Worlds

The backstory of how Jesus came to save us from sin, so common in the culture twenty years earlier, has been lost. Now, within the seas of pluralism, people resist seeing Jesus as anything more than one of the many possible ways to God.

This is the far country of the new post-Christendom cultures of North America, a place our parents and grandparents never knew. How are we to cross into these places where the grand story of God sending the Son has been forgotten?

We need to create spaces where our lives can honestly intersect those of other faiths who live among us. As communities, we must inhabit places with people in everyday life so that out of these places, God's kingdom can break into the worlds of religious diversity.

The Prodigal Returns

Prodigal Christianity is an invitation to be caught up in the work of the Triune God to restore the world to relationship with God and the flourishing of God's purposes in all creation. When this happens, the new life of the kingdom takes shape and bleeds into the world.

The kingdom depends more on our obedience than our skills, more on our integrity than our technique, more on what the Holy Spirit will do than anything we have figured out.

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Prodigal Christianity | *David E. Fitch and Geoff Holsclaw (cont'd)*

Recommended Resources

1. **Read** Auxano Founder and Team Leader Will Mancini's thoughts on Austin Stone Church and their Missional Milestones.
2. **Read** a conversation between Frank Viola and *Prodigal Christianity* author David Fitch about the book.
3. **Listen** to a brief video as authors David Fitch and Geoff Holsclaw discuss why they wrote *Prodigal Christianity*.

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Go Ahead Actions for Vision Clarity

by Jim Randall

Vision Clarity Connection

Over the last half century, the local church has relegated the meaning of discipleship to an “institutional style” class or even a series of checked “do’s and don’ts”. However, authors and pastors David E. Fitch and Geoff Holsclaw suggest that *“to be Christian is to learn to become prodigal.”* A prodigal Christian is one who *“unfolds a Christian way of living that is determined by this prodigal nature of our God in Jesus Christ by the Spirit.”* This approach will challenge church leaders to think “life impact” not just “information transfer”; think “experiential learning” not just “programs and events”. Church leaders are constantly trying to help membership embody the mission of their church in their day to day lives. These leaders must become more intentional about creating a journey that will shape this desired outcome.

Go Ahead

Use the following “5 Missional Living Learnings” for leaders as a key construct in the next staff meeting. Allow the learnings to influence ideas, create a journey, and shape culture.

5 Missional Living Learnings for Leaders

- 1. Send the Individual, Before Drawing the Crowd** - Don’t think “if we build it they will come” but rather “if we build them they can go!” The leader must reorient church culture toward becoming a sending church versus being an attractional one. **Idea: Suspend weekend services in order for the members to serve the community.**
- 2. Equip Believers for Real Life Conversations** - Life is messy! Too often as leaders we try to train and lead in ideal circumstances. *“Here is your script, go from question to question. The result will be guaranteed!”* Help believers navigate the “messy conversations” of life. **Idea: Provide crisis counseling volunteers at the local shelter.**
- 3. Recognize that God Uses Us, But Doesn’t Need Us** - So often we try to fit God into our agenda versus finding out where we fit in God’s agenda. The second signpost, *missio Dei*, points us to *“squarely into the middle of this world where God is, it will enable us to discern where God is working.”* By coming to a healthy understanding of our place, God will do amazing things through our church. **Idea: Send members to the center of the mall, office complex, festival, or sports event and see what God does!**
- 4. Develop Missional Living as a Life-long Pursuit** - It is easy to think, “let’s teach them what to say” & “send them out”. While this might be one step toward creating a missional living culture it is not the full expression of missional living. **Idea: Create a spiritual growth pathway that will show the multiple levels and facets of missional living.**
- 5. Elevate and Celebrate** - As the fourth signpost points us, *“our lives should be characterized by a testimony that points away from oneself to the works of Christ in our midst. Our witness is about everyday attentiveness and faithfulness to God’s kingdom that helps others learn to see it for themselves.”* **Idea: Elevate the work of the Holy Spirit by celebrating the stories of changed lives in your church.**



More About Jim Randall

As Chief Management Officer and Lead Navigator of Auxano, Jim Randall guides churches all over the country as “vision strategist.” After serving as the primary developer of ministries at a 2000 attendee church, Jim became one of the founding officers of Auxano in 2004.

Jim’s expertise lies with developing ministries based upon clarified vision. He brings a breadth of leadership and church growth knowledge from his proficiency of coaching senior pastors and multiple church staffs in the vision arena, especially around organizational clarity, ministry alignment, and team synergy. Jim has demonstrated achievement as a strategic thinker with a unique ability to bring a group of people to a deep sense of personal ownership and passion.

His education includes a Master of Arts in Religious Education from Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary and a B.S. in Religion from Liberty University. Jim lives just outside of Orlando in Merritt Island, FL with his wife and son.

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