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 **Fruitful congregations ‘Learn’ (v. 15)**

***Fruitful Congregations are shaped by understanding their life and witness as part of God’s unfolding story of redemption***

**Life story**

As we read the Bible we are invited into a story. It’s a story about our lives. Interpreted by God and scripted by Him, it helps us to make sense of life’s purpose, ups and downs, joys and sorrows. As the story unfolds we learn that life is *good, broken, can be different* and *has hope*.

In the first two chapters of Genesis we see that *life is good*. It’s how God made it to be. As the story of creation is set out in Genesis chapter one, the phrase that God repeatedly uses to describe everything He has made is that ‘it was good’ (Genesis 1v.9; v.12; v.25; v.31). Today, as we experience the goodness of life it points us to God as the giver of every good gift we enjoy.

But all of us also know and feel that *life is broken*. Humanity’s choice to turn away from God unleashes disastrous consequences that we still suffer from in our lives and world today. Everything is out of kilter and not the way it is supposed to be. Every relationship key to our lives is affected – our relationship with ourselves, with God, with others and with the world around us (Genesis 3v.7; v.8-10; v.11-13; v.16-19). As we and others experience this brokenness, we grasp for an answer ‘why?’ God’s answer is that brokenness comes from humanity’s great falling away from Him.

However, *life* *can be different*. Things can change because of God’s love in Jesus. He has come to make His Father known, to make sense of life and the world and to make it possible for everything to be put right that our sin has put wrong. Heavy hints of what Jesus is coming to do begin to be dropped throughout the Old Testament. The gospels record Jesus’ coming, who He was, what He said, how He lived, died, rose and returned to heaven. Our confident message is that anyone and everyone who looks to Him, leans on Him and gives their life to Him will know the difference that He makes (II Corinthians 5 v.17).

The rest of the Bible teases out the significance of what Jesus has done and how things will be when He comes again. *Life has hope*. God is remaking the world into a new and improved place to live with Him in which there will be no more death, mourning, crying or pain (Revelation 21 v1-5). In an increasingly hopeless and despairing world, the church has a very different note to sound.

**Learned story**

As God’s People in His Church, He invites us to enter, participate in and contribute to this unfolding story. But we can only do so as we allow the Bible to frame and set the agenda for our life and witness. Our life together should present a picture of relationships restored with God, ourselves and others. Our witness must be shaped to tell the story of what God has done in Jesus and to make a contribution to what He is doing to remake individual lives and the world.

In John 15, verse 15 Jesus says, ‘I no longer call you servants, because a servant does not know His master’s business. Instead I have called you friends, for everything that I learned from my Father I have made known to you.’ So, congregations don’t decide what the church should believe or prioritise doing. Rather, we learn the Father’s story, demonstrated in the life of Jesus and passed on to us in the Bible.

**Lived story**

So, as we live our own lives and interact with others today as followers of Jesus, this story is what we always come back to and seek to draw others into. When *life is good*, we thank God and prompt others to think to do the same. When *life is broken*, we have a framework for making sense of that and to show the tenderness of God to one another and to others in distress. We pursue and promote the possibility that *life can be different* because of Jesus and that *life has hope* in Him.

Fruitfulness comes in our life and witness from knowing and living the story. Barrenness will result from leaving God’s script to follow the latest alternative fads and fashions in the church or secular worlds.

*Life is ‘good, broken, can be different and has hope.’ In what ways do you find this a useful summary of the Bible’s story?*

*In what ways can we learn, and continue to come back to, this story in our church life together?*

*Imagine a conversation with someone in your church who is going through a time of suffering. How might the outline of the Bible story help you know what to say to them?*

*What alternative stories does the world tell to explain and try to make sense of life?*