Way-Maker Series

“Way Maker’s Way Makers”

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Digging Deeper
Way-Maker Series: Way Maker’s Way Makers
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Background Notes

Key Scripture Texts: Mark 2:1-12; John 12:20-24; Romans 14:13

Introduction

Our creedal faith affirms that Jesus is God’s Son, the way to God, and God’s way to us. To ask the question of a Christian, “Who is God?” leads to the defining answer: God is the one who raised Jesus from the dead, having before raised Israel from Egypt. To see the human face of God, look at Jesus. And the Gospels disclose the person of Jesus through his words and deeds. When Isaiah called on Israel to “prepare the way of the Lord,” he ultimately opened up the Jewish imagination to the future arrival of the Messiah, anointed by God, whose feet would touch the soil of 1st century Palestine and announce the coming of the kingdom of God. Faithful Jews would respond to his message and miracles, and also to his invitation to follow him as disciples. Through their obedience to take up their own cross, they would blaze a trail throughout the Mediterranean cities of the Roman Empire, starting in Jerusalem. Jesus the Way-Maker would thereby inspire a new generation of Way-Makers, bringing good news, the “Gospel” of the kingdom to hungry hearts, broken bodies, and despairing lives. The result, by the end of the 1st century, would be Christian communities planted in major cities and towns “shining forth the word of life,” and igniting a flame that pierced the darkness of the world for two millennia. Church history gives the record of their work.

We are the heirs of this legacy, and the stories of Jesus continue to inspire more generations of Jesus Way-Makers. In our texts this week, we explore one more theme, concluding our series on The Way. Two texts illustrated the personal ministry of Jesus, but in partnership with his followers who opened up the way for others to find Jesus. The last text, chosen for this week, reminds the community of faith to carefully protect the fellow-workers in this mission, supporting and not hindering their efforts for the sake of the kingdom.

Scripture Texts

A few days later, when Jesus again entered Capernaum, the people heard that he had come home.  So many gathered that there was no room left, not even outside the door, and he preached the word to them.  Some men came, bringing to him a paralytic, carried by four of them.  Since they could not get him to Jesus because of the crowd, they made an opening in the roof above Jesus and, after digging through it, lowered the mat the paralyzed man was lying on.  When Jesus saw their faith, he said to the paralytic, "Son, your sins are forgiven."  Now some teachers of the law were sitting there, thinking to themselves, "Why does this fellow talk like that? He's blaspheming! Who can forgive sins but God alone?"  Immediately Jesus knew in his spirit that this was what they were thinking in their hearts, and he said to them, "Why are you thinking these things? Which is easier: to say to the paralytic, 'Your sins are forgiven,' or to say, 'Get up, take your mat and walk'? But that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins..." He said to the paralytic, "I tell you, get up, take your mat and go home."  He got up, took his mat and walked out in full view of them all. This amazed everyone and they praised God, saying, "We have never seen anything like this!" (Mark 2:1-12).

Now there were some Greeks among those who went up to worship at the Feast. They came to Philip, who was from Bethsaida in Galilee, with a request, "Sir," they said, "we would like to see Jesus." Philip went to tell Andrew; Andrew and Philip in turn told Jesus. Jesus replied, "The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified. I tell you the truth, unless a kernel of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains only a single seed. But if it dies, it produces many seeds (John 12:20-24).

Therefore let us stop passing judgment on one another. Instead, make up your mind not to put any stumbling block or obstacle in your brother's way (Romans 14:13).
Opening the Roof for Jesus (Mark 2:1-12)
In the first text for this week’s study, we witness the remarkable restoration of the paralytic man. The account in both Mark and Luke’s Gospels is full of detail, while Matthew’s version is more concise. It is the detail which shades the meaning of the story. Before engaging with the material, some background on Mark’s approach to his Gospel as a whole is in order. Here are the key points.

Plan of Mark’s Gospel
1. Mark has a number of distinctive characteristics worth noting up front. There are others which it is better for us to discover together as we encounter them in reading the text for our study this week.
2. Mark wants the reader to have a correct understanding of the identity of Jesus. But he also wants that identity to be known for all the right reasons. One idea he knows became a source of great confusion for people was that of the "Messiah".
3. The Messiah, to the popular mind, was to be the rescuer of Israel from her enemies, the builder of the temple, and the king of David's royal line. So-called Messiahs had already appeared, and more were on the way. In each case, their violent and militant methods had led to crushing defeats at the hand of the Romans.
4. Had the popular audience listened carefully to the writings of the Hebrew Bible, they would have heard another interpretation of Messiah--one that included suffering and death. This Messiah carried the national sins of Israel to his death and brought atonement and redemption to the nation.
5. But the painful reality of "failed Messiahs" made it difficult for Jesus' audience to accept the notion that their "real Messiah" would undergo this humiliation. Weakness was not in the cards, as far as they were concerned.
6. Mark, in his portrait of Jesus, makes it plain that Jesus will not allow the popular view of the Messiah to corrupt a proper belief about himself. In Mark's telling of the story, Jesus forbids the telling of his Messiahship to others. Scholars call this the "Messianic Secret" theme of Mark's gospel.
7. For Mark, the true character of Jesus was as the humble, suffering servant, who rejected popular acclaim and empty praise. Though Jesus was truly son of God and Messiah, it was in a way quite different than people imagined. In fact, Jesus saw great danger in the false belief that the Messiah would use power and coercion to bring about his purposes.
8. Whenever Mark records the miracles of Jesus (healings, exorcisms, nature miracles) he does so, not to turn these actions of Jesus into "proofs" that he is God's Son or "evidences" that he is the Messiah. Rather, the works of Jesus only underscore his servant role. In what is no doubt a pivotal, key text of the whole gospel, Jesus said:
   "For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many" (Mark 10:45).
9. In the way Mark organizes his gospel, the first part describes the works of Jesus, largely away from Judea and Jerusalem, the centers of official Judaism. Rather, he ministers to people in the Gentile-dominated regions of Galilee and its surroundings. He then makes his approach to the center of Jewish power and encounters resistance, hostility, arrest, crucifixion and death.
10. In a similar way, Mark seems to be saying to his reader, we find ourselves in a largely hostile world, where people like Nero do to us what people like the High Priest and Pilate did to Jesus. But like Jesus, until we finally confront the centers of worldly power, we will continue to do the works of Jesus, heal the sick, cast out demons and, should that day come, follow Jesus to the cross.

In telling the life story of Jesus, Mark, then, is also telling our story. As we read and study this gospel together, may we find ourselves in its story as well.

Interpreting Mark 2:1-12
Coming Home: Back to Capernaum
Jesus returns to Capernaum, his new home, in spite of the self-imposed isolation following the cure of the leper in the previous chapter. We recall that the leper did not follow the instructions to "keep it quiet" with the result that Jesus went to "solitary places" to avoid the crowds of seekers. There is irony here. The leper, himself once isolated by the quarantine, now moves freely about, spreading the good news of his healing, while, at the same time, Jesus assumes the role of isolation. In effect the healer "bears our infirmities" through the very act of
healing. Perhaps Mark wants us to see the redemptive role taken by Jesus as he proclaims the arrival of the kingdom in word and deed. The form Jesus' role now takes is to avoid the "public" arrivals into towns and villages. Mark uses the Greek work *phaneros* (publicly, openly) and tells us that Jesus can no longer approach his preaching and healing work in this way. Once more, we are confronted with the problem of the "crowds".

In the current section (2:1-12), Jesus does return to Capernaum, but we assume in the more private fashion, entering "a house", perhaps the one he lives in with Simon and his family. It is once again important to note that Mark considers Capernaum as "home" for Jesus, the place where he is gathering around him his "family" (*oikos*), the newly restored Israel who already had been impacted by his proclamation about the kingdom of God. Though the NIV translates the timeframe as "a few days later", other scholars argue for a longer period of time, a view I am inclined to hold.

It is by word of mouth, no doubt, that people become aware of his arrival and, again, they mob the house. And again, he proclaims the word, the *dabar*, to them. While this is happening, a group of people bring a "paralytic" to Jesus. The presence of the crowd hinders their intentions. Once more, Mark reveals the irony of the situation: it was the healing ministry of Jesus which attracted the crowds and hindered his own desire to move about, spreading far and wide the word of the kingdom. In this case, the crowd is already present and they hinder the healing of this single man. All of which implies that Jesus' kingdom message was not intended to fuel the fire of a mass, rebel movement whose sheer numbers would accomplish its purposes. On the contrary, Jesus, who has so far only called four disciples, never wants to miss the personal contact with those he encounters.

*The Healing of the Paralytic: Forgiveness and Restoration*

Mark meticulously describes the process used in bringing the man to Jesus. It is worth noting that Matthew does not, in his telling of the story, provide us with the same level of detail. Mark tells us 1) that four people were carrying the man; 2) they made an opening in the roof above Jesus by "digging" (Greek: *exorusso*; the text actually says, "they unroofed the roof by digging"); 3) they lowered him on the simple pallet (Greek: *krabbatos*) through the opening. This account shows knowledge of Galilean home construction. The roofs of the houses were flat. Access to the roof would be by an outside ladder. Such a house would be one-storied, indicating the humble position and means of Jesus and his followers. The act of "digging" shows that the roof was made of mud and thatch. Here is the written account of an eyewitness who observed first-hand the determination of these four people to "get their man to Jesus".

This effort is not lost on Jesus. Mark tells us he "saw their faith" (Greek: *pistis*; Hebrew: *emunah*). We remember that Jesus began his ministry as a call to "repentance" and "faith in the good news". The notion of "faith", as understood by the Hebrew mind, was closely connected to the covenant, God's sacred bond with his people. Faith was not mere intellectual assent to a body of truth. Faith was not sterile orthodoxy. Rather, it was the very thing a person lived and died for. The root idea of the Hebrew word was "to establish" or cause one to stand. It was a genuine and unwavering confidence in God which showed itself through demonstrable action. In the story before us, the four demonstrated faith in and through their actions. Undeterred by the crowds who blocked an ordinary entrance to the presence of Jesus, they took initiative and "broke through" the mud and thatch to lower their friend to Jesus.

As far as Jesus is concerned, the paralytic is about to join the newly forming community of Israel once again. He addresses him as "Son". The Greek has the more affectionate "Child" (*teknon*) which no doubt translates the Hebrew *beni*. Much could be made of this form of address: that the paralytic is about to become a newly admitted member of the community, about to begin life again with the innocence of a little child. Whatever cloud hung over this man's life, is about to be lifted with the same drama as the tearing up of the roof, no doubt ushering in the rays of sunlight above. And this light will start to shine in ways not yet seen in the events of Mark's gospel thus far.

While the reader awaits the miracle of healing, yet again, Jesus makes an astonishing pivot in his message. Up till now, he has driven out demons and healed the sick. He has proclaimed the arrival of the kingdom as a matter
of repentance and faith. But Mark has not let us in on the detailed content of his message. But now, in the presence of the paralytic and his believing escorts, Jesus utters new words: "your sins are, at this very moment, forgiven" (that is the import of the Greek text). Forgiveness entails a sending away, a release from the power of sin. In a similar fashion, Jesus has already released people from demons and sent them away. But here, Jesus makes a declaration: your sins are sent away. Scholars note the passive voice of the verb. Jesus does not say, "I forgive your sins." Rather, in keeping with the belief that forgiveness is a divine action, he honors his Father's authority and defers the agency of the forgiveness to Him.

But this nuance seems to be lost on a group of people present in the house: the scribes (Hebrew: sopherim) who dedicated themselves to the interpretation of Torah and the transmission of its meaning (the content of the halakha, the oral tradition). Why do they take offense at Jesus? It is a quiet offense, unspoken, and only "in their hearts". Yet, they no doubt exchange knowing glances, frowns accompanied by turned up mouths and furrowed brows. Yet their reasoning was simple: 1) why is "this one" speaking like this? 2) Blasphemy; 3) Is any one able to send away sins immediately except "The One God"? The scribes would have known their scriptures well. Israel lived under a shadow of exile from which it had never recovered. The Roman occupation could only be seen as a continuing punishment for shared, national sins. But their prophet Daniel had once offered a prayer of repentance, seeking forgiveness for these sins some 600 years before (Daniel 9). He was told that atonement for sin would await the anointing of the "Most Holy", and that was an event belonging to the future. What Jesus claimed by offering forgiveness of sins now was paramount to a fulfillment of Daniel’s prophecy: that the forgiveness of sins was already come and that he was authorized to proclaim it in their midst. For Jesus to proclaim the arrival of the kingdom meant to proclaim the sending away of sins and to announce a national forgiveness and return from exile. That was good news!

How will Jesus sustain his claim? First, Mark tells us that he "knew in his spirit" what they were thinking. This power of immediate discernment is a prophetic power and in itself was an authenticating event. The scribes must have been surprised that their own thoughts were "open" to Jesus. But now, secondly, Jesus takes another bold step. He asks whether it is "easier" to proclaim forgiveness or to command healing. The debate is not about contrasting the ease of forgiveness vs. the ease of healing, but about contrasting the ease of "proclaiming" of them. Remember, Jesus is the bringer of the good news that the kingdom of God has come. The same Voice which had commanded demons to leave and sickness to release its victims, is now proclaiming that the paralytic's sins will no longer hold him.

It is the same Voice which commands the man to "rise, raise your mat and start walking." This latter command has, of course, a more visible and tangible quality to it. You can see a healing. Can you see forgiveness? Jesus was certainly able to "see faith", embodied in the actions of the paralytic's companions. After all, they had become Way-Makers, affirming their trust in Jesus the Way-Maker! He was able to "see the thoughts" of the quietly puzzled scribes. So now, in and through the healing of the paralytic, he will allow the crowd gathered that day to "see the forgiveness of sins" by the powerful utterance of the words he spoke to him. His language is also tied closely to the idea of "resurrection": "rise, raise". The kingdom's arrival is about "raising up" what has fallen down, about restoring what has been lost. It is about turning lives, bent by the oppressiveness of sin, into young children able to "stand up", not only in faith, but in fact. On that day, Jesus makes concrete the nature of true forgiveness. Healing and forgiveness are very much connected, not merely as one in proof of the other, but in a real sense one embodying the other. For most Jews of the time forgiveness and healing belonged to a long distant future when God would once again restore his people. They belonged only to God who, at this moment in their national life, seemed very far away.

That is why Jesus calls himself "the Son of Man" who has power on earth to send away sins. Once more, Daniel's prophecy lies in the background of this scene.

In my vision at night I looked, and there before me was one like a son of man, coming with the clouds of heaven. He approached the Ancient of Days and was led into his presence. He was given authority, glory and sovereign power; all peoples, nations and men of every language worshiped him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion that will not pass away, and his kingdom is one that will never be destroyed (Daniel 7:13-14).
This ancient oracle helps the reader understand what Jesus means by the title "Son of Man". He refers, of course, to himself and to the Daniel figure. He is truly human, yet he is the Son, loved by God, authorized by God (God is pleased with him) to accomplish on earth what is also true in heaven. What the scribes no doubt believed from their halakha was only a heavenly prerogative, Jesus now proclaims as becoming true "on earth". If that is true, then Daniel's vision is starting to see fulfillment in the words and deeds of Jesus. More than one paralytic was raised up that day. The hopes of Israel were taking a surprising new turn: forgiveness and complete restoration were now happening on earth. The old paralysis was being healed. And, as Mark puts it, this was taking place "in full view of them all".

True worship is also being restored. The healing of the paralytic does not simply bring "amazement". It leads to a heart-felt worship of God, expressed, in Mark's words, as an ascription of "glory" (Hebrew: kabod) to God. What they had witnessed was a revelation of God's presence. Something "unseen" had suddenly appeared in their midst and they knew it! Mark makes clear that "everyone" shared this experienced, leading us to suspect that even the Sopherim joined the celebration. Until now, their experience of the word of God lived on in the oral tradition, the halakha. But now they have experienced a new embodiment of that word in the person of Jesus who brought to light what had never before been seen in their generation. On that day they ceased to be sopherim (scribes) of the halakha (tradition) and became sopherim of the kingdom of God.

With such breath-taking detail and startling outcomes, let us not miss the crucial role of those who tore up the roof, opening up the way for lowering the paralytic man to Jesus. We are stirred by the boldness and disruptive nature of their faith. Mud and grass could easily be repaired. The lack of decorum in the act would soon be forgotten, overshadowed by the marvelous deed of Jesus. Life’s reversals had already damaged the man’s body, so what’s a little hole in the sod among the friends of Jesus? The Way-Maker is an attractional figure in the Gospel story, inviting the faith of these faithful companions of the paralytic. Conventions are broken as they become Way-Makers. Tradition is breached as they open the roof and let in the light of God’s Son for the healing and forgiveness of the man who had become closed off and shut in to sickness and guilt. That’s what the new Way-Makers of Jesus do, inspired by his example and energized by his power.

When Greeks Ask for Jesus (John 12:20-24)
By and large the public ministry of Jesus, lasting some three years, the audience of Jesus and his work was Jewish. After all, Jesus was a Jew, born into the society of Second Temple Judaism that predominated Palestine in the 1st century. Messiah had been foretold to the Hebrew people by the ancient prophets of Israel. Knowing this, Jesus first instructed his followers to their fellow-Jews. Shortly after Jesus called the Twelve apostles, he gave them is commission:

- Do not go among the Gentiles or enter any town of the Samaritans. Go rather to the lost sheep of Israel. As you go, preach this message: 'The kingdom of heaven is near.' Heal the sick, raise the dead, cleanse those who have leprosy, drive out demons. Freely you have received, freely give (Matthew 10:5-8; also Matthew 15:24).

The back-story of this approach begins with the old story of Abraham, chosen by Yahweh to form the nucleus of a chosen people.

Yet, Abraham’s chosenness was not for himself alone; he was chosen for a long-term purpose that would one day break out into the whole world. In the original text of Abraham’s call, we see the future mission of Israel for the nations, the Gentiles, the Greeks:

The LORD had said to Abram, "Leave your country, your people and your father's household and go to the land I will show you. I will make you into a great nation and I will bless you; I will make your name great, and you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse; and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you" (Genesis 12:1-3).

“All peoples” signals the new turn for the future mission of God’s people. Abraham and his descendents were God’s proto-type, His divine pattern, for the creation of a new humanity, shaped by His covenant and committed to His kingdom in the world. His choice of Abraham would begin the project of forming a new alternative society that would grow within the fabric of humankind until one day it would fill the whole world with His glory. The Way-Maker would walk with this chosen people, transforming them into Way-Makers who would be
“light for the nations.” From Isaiah’s big book come the announcement and the admonition for Israel to fulfill her appointed purpose beyond the borders of her land:

3 The LORD will surely comfort Zion and will look with compassion on all her ruins; he will make her deserts like Eden, her wastelands like the garden of the LORD. Joy and gladness will be found in her, thanksgiving and the sound of singing. 4 “Listen to me, my people; hear me, my nation: The law will go out from me; my justice will become a light to the nations. 5 My righteousness draws near speedily, my salvation is on the way, and my arm will bring justice to the nations. The islands will look to me and wait in hope for my arm. 6 Lift up your eyes to the heavens, look at the earth beneath; the heavens will vanish like smoke, the earth will wear out like a garment and its inhabitants die like flies. But my salvation will last forever, my righteousness will never fail (Isaiah 51:3-6).

Arise, shine, for your light has come, and the glory of the LORD rises upon you. 2 See, darkness covers the earth and thick darkness is over the peoples, but the LORD rises upon you and his glory appears over you. 3 Nations will come to your light, and peoples will see your glory. (Isaiah 60:1-3).

It is no surprise, then, that Jesus calls himself “the light of the world” (John 8:12; 9:5), making The Way for God’s light to pierce the darkness. And then he calls his followers, “the light of the world” (Matthew 5:14), The Way-Makers for light to eventually flood the nations of the world.

In our second text from John 12 we see this new development unfolding during the final days of Jesus’ earthly ministry. The setting for this account is the backdrop of Jesus raising Lazarus (John 11) and then entering Jerusalem riding the donkey to the shouts of the people:

"Hosannal!" "Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!" "Blessed is the King of Israel!" 14 Jesus found a young donkey and sat upon it, as it is written, 15 "Do not be afraid, O Daughter of Zion; see, your king is coming, seated on a donkey's colt" (John 12:13-15).

This is kingdom acclaim, the exultation of triumph, and the arrival of the Lord’s anointed. Ordinarily, kings rode donkeys after a decisive defeat of their enemies, when the donkey replaced the horse as a powerful symbol that the war had ended and peace was at hand. For Israel the imagery meant that God’s people had triumphed over the nations. But there is irony in what follows.

Rather than asserting dominance over the nations in a military fashion, Mark continues by telling a different story. The nations do not appear as the enemies of Jesus, but as those who come seeking him. The writer says that “certain Greeks” among the worshippers during Passover approached Philip, a disciple of Jesus, asking “to see Jesus.” Their request might well have the nuance of seeking “an audience” with Jesus whom the crowds associate with the “King of Israel.” In response, Philip invites Andrew to accompany him as together they make their way to Jesus, telling of the request. The sequence, Philip-Andrew-Jesus, reminds us of the manner Jesus met his first disciple in John 1:37-42, described with the sequence, Andrew-Simon-Jesus. In this first instance in the Gospel of John, Jesus is the Way-Maker, gathering his followers from the Jews. The second instance in John 12 shows his followers receiving the inquiry of the Greeks (Gentiles, the nations) and then telling Jesus about it. Those who had been shown The Way by Jesus now become Way-Makers for others who are beyond the national borders of Israel. The Greeks represent a social group dissimilar to the Jews in ethnicity, and yet who voluntarily want to become a part of the New Israel forming around Jesus.

Just as the men who aided the paralytic find The Way to Jesus through the sodden roof of the house, so the disciples of Jesus share in opening up The Way to Jesus for those who are naturally outside the commonwealth of Israel.

There is no mention of Jesus pursuing the inquiry at that time in his ministry, and yet the text makes clear that Jesus fully intends to move forward with the plans necessary to make The Way for the Greeks to come to him. He uses a metaphor, a mini-parable, to express that intention. Noting the urgency of the Greek’s visit, Jesus says “the hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified” (12:22). He refers, of course, to his coming crucifixion and resurrection whereby he will open up salvation for Israel and then the whole world. The sacrifice he will offer on the cross becomes The Way, and the real response to the request of the Greeks.

The metaphor is rich with missional energy. Jesus compares himself to a single seed, by which he refers to the manner of his earthly ministry to the Jews thus far. Limited by time and space, confined in the mortality of his
human body, Jesus is only able to reach a finite number of lost people, confined to the boundaries of his national identity as a Jew. He knows that the work he undertakes is for the whole world, and the Greeks represent that world which now comes to meet him. They are “the nations coming to the light” described by Isaiah in the texts we cited above. With this recognition that the nations are coming, Jesus invokes the metaphor. The planting of the seed is the crucifixion of Jesus and his death. The growth of the seed, rich with clusters of grain, is his resurrection whereby he makes himself present to all his followers through the Holy Spirit, even as John noted at the beginning of his Gospel: to him “God gives the Spirit without limit” (John 3:34). By his death and resurrection, Jesus gives his life without limit to the nations of the world, including the Greeks who seek him.

From the John text we learn that The Way-Makers for Jesus must be receptive to audiences that are unlike themselves. During the days of Jesus the line between Jew and Gentile was sharp according to the orthodoxy of Judaism. The Pharisees were especially particular about purifying life and practice from the contaminating influences of the non-Jewish world. Who one ate with, did business with, and even shared space with might influence Jews for the worse. The emphasis on law-keeping in matters of food, fellowship, Sabbath, and the like grew out of the belief that God would only turn again in blessing to Israel when they had fully separated themselves from foreigners and their practices. The ministry of Jesus contradicted that approach, and called all kinds of people into the circle of his followers. Through his metaphor in John 12 he foretold that Gentiles would also become part of that circle.

The church struggled with the practice of unifying persons irrespective of cultural differences. Since the first converts were Jewish, opening up The Way to Gentiles led to considerable conflict and many Jewish Christians wanted Gentiles to become Jews before they would be admitted to the church. In Acts 15 we see the efforts of the Jerusalem church to resolve the conflict, and in Galatians 2:11ff Paul and Peter had an intense clash of belief over this very issue. Later, Paul would write extensively about the basis for equal inclusion of both Jew and Gentile in the community of Jesus. Noting the “distance” once experienced by both groups, he declared that “in Christ” what was “far away” was “brought near” by “the blood of Christ.” In a masterful and elegant text from his letter to the Ephesians, he wrote:

11 Therefore, remember that formerly you who are Gentiles by birth and called "uncircumcised" by those who call themselves "the circumcision" (that done in the body by the hands of men)-- 12 remember that at that time you were separate from Christ, excluded from citizenship in Israel and foreigners to the covenants of the promise, without hope and without God in the world. 13 But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far away have been brought near through the blood of Christ. 14 For he himself is our peace, who has made the two one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility, 15 by abolishing in his flesh the law with its commandments and regulations. His purpose was to create in himself one new man out of the two, thus making peace, 16 and in this one body to reconcile both of them to God through the cross, by which he put to death their hostility. 17 He came and preached peace to you who were far away and peace to those who were near. 18 For through him we both have access to the Father by one Spirit. 19 Consequently, you are no longer foreigners and aliens, but fellow citizens with God's people and members of God's household, 20 built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone. 21 In him the whole building is joined together and rises to become a holy temple in the Lord. 22 And in him you too are being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit (Ephesians 2:11-22).

The “preaching of peace” to both the “far and the near” is now the ministry of Jesus’ followers, The Way-Makers, who receive their authorization to do so by the work of The Way-Maker, Jesus Christ.

Way-Makers in the Community of Jesus (Romans 14:13).

Learning to live together in the community of Jesus is no small task. While Jesus has been provision for such a community to be formed, comprised of all sorts of people, the actual practice of living together offers challenges that at times disturb the “peace” made possible by the cross. What Jesus authorized and achieved by his redemptive work, the followers of Jesus must implement in the practices and relationships of local congregations of believers. Paul said in the last quoted text above that “you too are being built together to become a dwelling” (Ephesians 2:22). The emphasis falls on “together,” since the history of our diversity has often been marked by divisiveness and alienation that is not easily or quickly overcome just because we belong to the body of Christ. Race, culture, language, economic status, and the like produce an environment that may not work well “together.” Such was the circumstance of the early church, where Jewish customs and Gentile practice clashed in
the context of everything from diet to worship. For this reason, the apostle Paul devoted a major section of Romans to considering the practices of the Gospel that make togetherness a living reality.

Our final text, Romans 14:13, belongs to a much larger block of material in the book of Romans. Falling at the end of the book, this section encompasses 14:1-15:13 which has been aptly titled, “God’s Call to Unity of Life and Worship Across Barriers of Custom and Ethnic Identity.” The topic sentence appears in 14:1:

Accept him whose faith is weak, without passing judgment on disputable matters (Romans 14:1).

“Weak faith” is an apt phrase for describing a person whose religious background lacks the foundation found in the faith of Israel, and that would have been true of Gentile converts to Jesus who had no upbringing in the Hebrew Bible. The word “accept” is an invitation for the community of Jesus to “make a way” to such a person and not abruptly isolate him from the rest. Because of the Gospel that individual has acceptance with God through Jesus Christ and membership in the church. However, the differences of “faith” might well make him vulnerable to “judgment” by others in the community, creating a division into “upper” and “lower” class groups. Way-Makers have continuing ministry to people after they become part of the body, breaking down barriers, overcoming differences, and opening up real conversations between them.

As evidenced in the teaching of Romans 14:1-15:13, the early Christians living in the Pauline churches faced the challenge to make good on the promise of God to unify life and worship when such barriers existed. Custom and identity of believers do not cease to exist after their conversion. Jews still had consciences shaped by religious conviction and practice; so did Gentiles. Matters of diet, the relationship between genders, the forms of worship, and language dialects remained imprinted. When such diversity was thrown together in fellowship and worship, sparks were bound to fly, and levels of personal discomfort would create irritations in relationships. Paul knew that the Way of the Gospel was strong enough to provide resources to work out those differences if the principles of the cross were patiently implemented in the life of the congregation. All of that takes work and loving commitment to the body of Christ. Throughout this extended passage in Romans Paul works out the details.

A simple outline of this material helps us to see what’s involved for Way-Makers inside the church:2

1. Judging and Being Judged (14:1-12)
2. Conscience and the Kingdom of God (14:13-23)
3. Mutual Welcome Based on the Messiah (15:1-13)

Strategically placed throughout this outline are important gems of spiritual guidance, rooted in the Gospel. Paul guides the church using these gems in an effort to address the difficult points of conflict occasioned by the differences of custom and ethnicity: whether diet (Kosher), or holy days (Sabbath), or clean and unclean practices (Holiness). By zeroing in on these hot-buttons of cultural conflict, Paul hopes to show how the formation of new habits in line with the Gospel will “make a way” from one person to another. Learning Christ-like practices by living in community under the Gospel becomes the basis for Christian ethics and an opportunity to show the world outside what it means to be a follower of Jesus Christ. Way-Makers inside the community because a light for those outside.

The chosen text for our study is 14:13, introduced by the emphatic “Therefore,” suggesting the central place of this instruction for the entire set of “Way-Maker” admonitions:

13 Therefore let us stop passing judgment on one another. Instead, make up your mind not to put any stumbling block or obstacle in your brother's way (Romans 14:13).

In what follows, we identify others that cohere with this one:

1 Accept him whose faith is weak, without passing judgment on disputable matters.
6 He who regards one day as special, does so to the Lord. He who eats meat, eats to the Lord, for he gives thanks to God; and he who abstains, does so to the Lord and gives thanks to God. 7 For none of us lives to himself alone and none of us dies to himself alone. 8 If we live, we live to the Lord; and if we die, we die to the Lord. So, whether we live or die, we

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2 Wright (2002), 734-751.
belong to the Lord. 9 For this very reason, Christ died and returned to life so that he might be the Lord of both the dead and
the living.

10 You, then, why do you judge your brother? Or why do you look down on your brother? For we will all stand before God's
judgment seat. ... 12 So then, each of us will give an account of himself to God. 13 Therefore let us stop passing judgment
on one another. Instead, make up your mind not to put any stumbling block or obstacle in your brother's way.

17 For the kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking, but of righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit, because
anyone who serves Christ in this way is pleasing to God and approved by men. 18 Let us therefore make every
effort to do what leads to peace and to mutual edification. 20 Do not destroy the work of God for the sake of food.

15:1 We who are strong ought to bear with the failings of the weak and not to please ourselves. 2 Each of us should please
his neighbor for his good, to build him up. 3 For even Christ did not please himself but, as it is written: "The insults of those
who insult you have fallen on me."

5 May the God who gives endurance and encouragement give you a spirit of unity among yourselves as you follow Christ
Jesus, so that with one heart and mouth you may glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. 7 Accept one
another, then, just as Christ accepted you, in order to bring praise to God. 8 For I tell you that Christ has become a servant
of the Jews on behalf of God's truth, to confirm the promises made to the patriarchs so that the Gentiles may glorify God
for his mercy

13 May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in him, so that you may overflow with hope by the power
of the Holy Spirit.

When we obstruct our brother or sister’s way (14:13), we are hardly Way-Makers for them. But we also litter the
way for outsiders to see what an authentic community looks like. That is why in the sentences prior to this one Paul makes this statement:

14:8 For I tell you that Christ has become a servant of the Jews on behalf of God's truth, to confirm the promises
made to the patriarchs so that the Gentiles may glorify God for his mercy.

Christ “the servant” (echoes of Isaiah), representing the Jews chosen by God through Abraham, confirms the
promises to Israel’s ancestors — promises that had as their goal “that the Gentiles may glorify God for his mercy.” To the extent that followers of Jesus, living in faithful community with each other, offer to the world an example of “life together” then the world will know the truth of the Gospel spoken by our lips and “confirmed” by our practices. Or, to put it in the winsome language of Jesus himself:

34 “A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. 35 By this all
men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another” (John 13:34-35).

Conclusion
“The Way-Maker’s Way Makers” are the followers of Jesus who take seriously their call to bring the Gospel to
the whole world. To them is entrusted the sacred compass of redemption, and also the Holy Scriptures which
map the journey. Collectively, the church of Jesus Christ embodies the truth of the Gospel in its words and
deeds. Genuine community is the palpable evidence that such a way is possible. From the beginning of its
history, the church walked the kingdom road for the whole world to see. Recognizing that its members were
sinners saved by grace, and imperfect provisional examples of the way, the church declared that Jesus is Lord,
“the way, the truth, and the life” (John 14:6). The journey has not been easy, and along the way Christians
encountered the debris of fallen humanity, the obstacles to a clear witness for their risen Lord. Persecution, like
robbers lurking in the shadows, resisted the in-breaking of God’s kingdom by opposing its message, killing its
followers, and ridiculing the cross as the center of its faith. And yet, in spite of all odds, the community of Jesus
continued to show others, one by one, that there is another way to be human — a better way. At times, members
of this community betrayed the Way-Making project through loss of faith, inconsistent lives, and the ever-present
temptation to imitate the methods of the world in advancing the cause. Nonetheless, the encouraging words of
Jesus sustained them:

32 “Do not be afraid, little flock, for your Father has been pleased to give you the kingdom. 33 Sell your possessions
and give to the poor. Provide purses for yourselves that will not wear out, a treasure in heaven that will not be
exhausted, where no thief comes near and no moth destroys. 34 For where your treasure is, there your heart will be
also. 35 “Be dressed ready for service and keep your lamps burning (Luke 12:32-35).
If we reach back to the first three centuries of the Christian era, the period of The Way-Makers for early Christian thought, we encounter a large number of works written by the church fathers. These represent the perspectives of Christians after the death of the apostles. Contrary to popular understanding, the Gospel flourished during this period and numerous defenders of the faith emerged from the fiery trials of persecution which lasted until the days of Constantine. Among the writings which have survived, is an anonymous work, believed to have originated from the late second century, though some place it as early as 125 C.E. We include two sections of this document to tie together our thoughts about the role of the church as Way-Maker. The thoughts expressed in that document will inspire and encourage us.

Letter to Diognetus 5, 6 (end of second century).

They take part in everything as citizens and endure everything as aliens. Every foreign country is their homeland, and every homeland is a foreign country to them. They marry like everyone else. They beget children, but they do not expose them after they are born. They have a common table, but no common bed. They are in the flesh, but they do not live according to the flesh. They live on earth, but their citizenship is in heaven. They obey the established laws, but through their way of life they surpass these laws. They love all people and are persecuted by all. Nobody knows them, and yet they are condemned. They are put to death, and just through this they are brought to life. They are as poor as beggars, and yet they make many rich. They lack everything, and yet they have everything in abundance. They are dishonored, and yet have their glory in this very dishonor. They are insulted, and just in this they are vindicated. They are abused, and yet they bless. Doing good, they are sentenced like evildoers. When punished with death, they rejoice in the certainty of being awakened to life. Jews attack them as people of another race, and Greeks persecute them, yet those who hate them cannot give any reason to justify their hostility.

In a word: what the soul is in the body, the Christians are in the world. As the soul is present in all the members of the body, so Christians are present in all the cities of the world. As the soul lives in the body, yet does not have its origin in the body, so the Christians live in the world yet are not of the world. Invisible, the soul is enclosed by the visible body: in the same way the Christians are known to be in the world, but the religion remains invisible. Even though the flesh suffers no wrong from the soul, it hates the soul and fights against it because it is hindered by the soul from following its lusts; so too the world, though suffering no wrong from the Christians, hates them because they oppose its lusts. The soul loves the flesh, but the flesh hates the soul; as the soul loves the members of the body, so the Christians love those who hate them. The soul is enclosed in the body, yet it holds the body together; the Christians are kept prisoners in the world, as it were, yet they are the very ones who hold the world together. Immortal, the soul lives in a mortal house; so too the Christians live in a corruptible existence as strangers and look forward to incorruptible life in heaven. When the body is poorly provided with food and drink, the soul gains strength. In the same way the number of Christians increases day by day when they are punished with death. Such is the important task God has entrusted to the Christians and they must not shirk it.

Way-Makers for the Risen Jesus “hold the world together” and persist in the prayer of Jesus: “Your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven.” They hear the clear prophetic word, “Whether you turn to the right or to the left, your ears will hear a voice behind you, saying, ‘This is the way; walk in it’” (Isaiah 30:21). They share the confidence of Paul, “Now may our God and Father himself and our Lord Jesus clear the way for us to come to you” (1 Thessalonians 3:11). “God, whom I serve with my whole heart in preaching the gospel of his Son, is my witness how constantly I remember you in my prayers at all times; and I pray that now at last by God's will the way may be opened for me to come to you.” I long to see you so that I may impart to you some spiritual gift to make you strong-- that is, that you and I may be mutually encouraged by each other's faith (Romans 1:9-12). Our commission, like Paul’s, trusts in The Way “to clear” and “to open” the future in our mission to the world

Glory to God! Amen.