

@ScottWilliams



CHURCHDIVERSITY



We are Church Diversity!

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What people are saying about *Church Diversity*

Scott Williams is an incredible and insightful leader who understands both the local church and the issue of diversity. He has embraced the intent of the gospel: God redeeming people from every nation through the blood of Christ. I've definitely learned from Scott and this book. You will too.

— Eric Geiger
Author, *Simple Church*
Executive Pastor, Christ Fellowship Miami

Whatever racial woes we face in America, they cannot be dealt with by politicians or Washington, DC, but rather by the local church. Scott's book can help our nation navigate through this critical and much needed conversation on race.

— J.C. Watts Jr.
Former Member of Congress

Diversity of people gives birth to the diversity of thought and bright new ideas emerge. For the sake of the gospel, our churches need these bright new ideas. Scott Williams is a superb communicator who unpacks diversity with courage, passion, and vulnerability.

—Tammy Kelley
Former Senior Leadership Team member
Willow Creek Community Church

Filmmaking is all about experiencing a journey through the eyes of another. Yet, when it comes to integration, this essential gift remains largely misunderstood. Scott Williams is ever seeking to see this gift opened and embraced. His book, like his life and ministry, is an invitation to the most rewarding of all human journeys.

— Jim Hanon,
Writer/Director *End of the Spear*

Leading a diverse congregation takes courage, intentionality, and consistency. Scott takes us to the practical side of theology and teaches HOW to become a church rich with diversity. This is one book every church leader needs to read so that our congregations on earth will start looking more like heaven!

— Troy Gramling
Lead Pastor, Potential Church

The mandate of Jesus spoken in his last words (Acts 1:8) was about multi-ethnicity. The first day of the church was strategic when Jerusalem was crowded with multi-ethnicity (Acts 2:5–11). The first church-wide controversy and conflict was about church diversity and multi-ethnicity (Acts 15). Now, in the 21st century, Scott Williams is bringing us back to a biblical understanding of multi-ethnicity. In his challenging book Church Diversity — Sunday the Most Segregated Day of the Week, Scott will lead you on a journey resulting in personal and church-wide awareness and growth.

— Dr. Samuel R. Chand
Author of *Cracking Your Church's Culture Code*

Diversity doesn't happen by accident. For every cultural rainbow, both corporately and congregationally, you will find a leader who was intentional about diversity. This book will be confirmation for some and a push in the back for others, but it is necessary for all.

— Tim Ross
Tim Ross Ministries
(former Young Adult Pastor, The Potters House of Dallas)

Diversity is an urgent matter in today's global marketplace and in the economic conditions we face. Embracing diversity in the workplace and appealing to diverse customer groups is essential for survival and growth. Pastor Scott Williams challenges us to move beyond the workplace and create the same urgency in our house of worship, with a fundamental question: does the sign on your church's front door read EVERYONE WELCOME?

— Fields Jackson Jr.
Founder & CEO, *Racing Toward Diversity Magazine*

There is no greater challenge within the Church today than navigating the difficult waters of cultural differences within the congregation and within the community. However, there is no more important task than taking the gospel to every member of our community regardless of the cultural differences that may exist. Thus, the Church must confront this issue with tenacity to ensure we are truly reaching our Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and uttermost parts of the earth. Scott Williams brings us great truths and great insight on how church leaders can move beyond the errors of the past into a new era of Christ followers standing side by side, hand in hand, worshiping the King . . . regardless of ethnicity. This is God's plan and God's desire. Thank you, Scott, for helping us get there!

— Jonathan Falwell
Pastor, Thomas Road Baptist Church, Lynchburg, VA

An increasingly diverse society will not find credible the message of God's love for all people as proclaimed from segregated churches. In Church Diversity: Sunday, the Most Segregated Day of the Week, Scott Williams provides a powerful, compelling, voice for a growing generation of church planters and pastors no longer interested in filling their pews with a homogeneous crowd but rather with the wonderful diversity of God's kingdom on earth as it is in heaven, all for the sake of the gospel.

— Dr. Mark DeYmaz
Lead Pastor, Mosaic Church of Central Arkansas
Author of *Building a Healthy Multi-ethnic Church* and *Ethnic Blends*

Scott Williams delivers 100 percent straight talk in his new book, Church Diversity: Sunday the Most Segregated Day of the Week. Pastor Williams calls out the elephant in the pew. With candor and passion he hits the bull's-eye with how ineffective the Church, at large, has been at closing the segregation gap. After providing historical context he unearths true stories of those that get diversity, do it, and how you can too. Christ prayed that we would all be one — this book brings us closer to being the answer to that prayer. A must-read for those who are determined to live centered in God's heart for His bride.

— Tami Heim
Co-author *@stickyJesus: how to live out your faith online*
Partner, The A Group Brand Development, Brentwood, TN
Former President of Borders Inc.

What a remarkable and timely read on the extraordinary power of difference. Our generation needs a challenge far beyond the politically correct conversations on diversity. . . . And Scott delivers a tough, intentional yet hopeful one.

— Travis G. Mason
Public Policy team at Google

Acknowledgments

God: Thank You for placing the burden on my heart to see Your Church more unified. Thank You for giving me the platform to share this important message and a true passion for diversity. Thanks for Your definition of true love.

LaKendria: You are the love of my life and my best friend. Thanks for the encouragement, the nudge, the understanding, the patience, and the belief in me. I could not imagine this journey with anyone else on the planet. Our best days are yet to come.

Wesley and Jayden: Thanks for the kind words and the stories you contributed to the book. Thanks for being patient with daddy during his late nights and early mornings. Wesley, thanks for believing in me and calling me an author before I ever wrote a chapter. Jayden, thanks for saying, “Dad, when I get older I’m going to write a book just like you, except it’s not going to take me as long.”

Mom: Thanks for believing in me, even when I didn’t always believe in myself. Thanks for challenging me to dream BIG and think BIGGER. You epitomize the notion that we tend to become what the most important people in our lives think we will become. I am better because of your undeniable belief in me.

Mari & Marc: Thanks for believing that your little brother could do BIG things.

My Team: N-Dub staff — We didn’t just talk diversity, we believed it, we lived it, and together we experienced it. Thanks for believing in me. We Are Church Diversity!

Marvin: Thanks for taking the faith risk on me, by placing me in a major leadership role at a young age. Because you believed in me, I will always believe in others.

Pastor Craig: Thanks for your leadership and providing me the opportunity to live out my calling and be part of a truly amazing work of God.

The Pioneers: Honor and thanks to the sociologists, pastors, church planters, leaders, researchers, dreamers, authors, and others who have gone before me in this fight to see a little heaven on earth.

Liz: Thanks for believing in me and guiding me through the publishing process.

New Leaf Publishing Group team: Thanks for your hard work and belief in this project and allowing me the opportunity to share this important message with the world. I have appreciated your genuine commitment to your mission “To Bring the Lost to Christ and Balance to the Body of Christ.”

My Friends and Family: Thanks for uploading your picture, for blogging about this book, tweeting about it, posting it to Facebook, providing input, making suggestions, challenging me, telling your friends, encouraging your pastor, sharing the message, praying, and believing that the Church can do better.

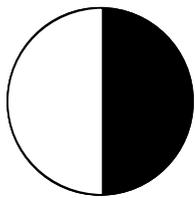
Behind the Scenes: Anyone that helped with anything on this project . . . you know who you are, thanks so much for your belief and commitment.



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Foreword





Nine years ago I sat across the table from Scott Williams at a sandwich shop enjoying our first lunch together. At the time, Scott was working in corporate America and I served as a pastor. Although we had totally different backgrounds and skin color, we both loved and served Christ.

Scott explained to me that even though our church, LifeChurch.tv, was full of mostly white people, his African American family felt very loved by our church and called to it.

Two things became obvious to me before I had finished the first half of my turkey sandwich. First, Scott was a gifted leader. Second, Scott cared more about diversity in the church than anyone that I'd ever met.

Sensing a double opportunity, I bombarded Scott with questions. The first round of questions revolved around leadership issues, the second around diversity — especially within the Church.

No matter what I asked, Scott responded with a theory, a quote, or a strong, unbending opinion. After a full hour of lively discussion, I asked one final question that stumped him. Never short for words, Scott froze when I blindsided him with a question that would eventually impact us both in a significant way. “When are you going to join our staff at LifeChurch.tv,” I asked, “and help us reach a broader audience for Christ?” I think I shocked myself as much as I did Scott.

Normally eloquent, Scott struggled to put together a coherent sentence. Although he couldn't answer my assertive question that day, several years later, Scott walked away from his upward track in politics, consulting, and entrepreneurial ventures to join our team as a campus pastor. From day one of Scott's

ministry in our church, one of his biggest contributions to our team centered around helping to broaden the church's reach.

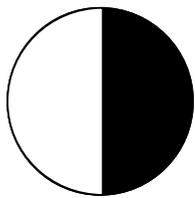
Five years later, after playing a major role in starting and building one of our strongest LifeChurch.tv campuses, it became obvious that Scott's ministry and message needed to go beyond the walls of our church. With my blessing, Scott decided to put more effort into getting the crucial message of diversity out into local churches across the world. The book you are holding is a significant part of his effort.

Chances are good that it is no accident you picked up this book. Just as God used Scott to help our church become more diverse, it's likely God wants to do the same for you.

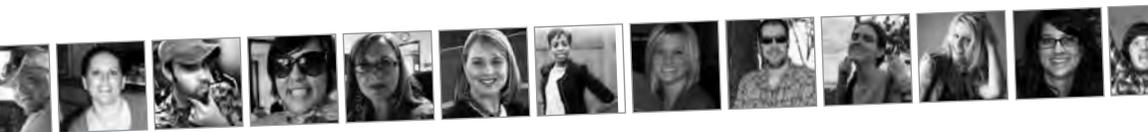
As a white guy raised around mostly white people, I couldn't understand why a person of a different race or from a different background might feel unwelcome or disconnected by what we did in church. I also never realized that doing a few small things could make a big difference in who we could reach with the gospel of Christ. Although you may not agree with all of Scott's ideas, I promise you that he will push you, stretch you, and challenge you. Not only will *Church Diversity* enlarge your heart, but Scott will also show you practical ways to expand the reach of your ministry like he did for us. Most importantly, he will convince you that diversity is obtainable and move you to take a necessary step in the right direction.

As the diversity of our culture continues to increase, Christ's Church has not been keeping pace in many parts of the world. If I can be so bold to speak on behalf of God, I truly believe He wants this to change. The most diverse place in the world will be heaven. It's time for a little heaven on earth.

— Craig Groeschel
Senior Pastor, LifeChurch.tv



Introduction





I remember it as though it was yesterday; it was a cool Saturday evening in the fall of 2007. We had just finished our Saturday evening church services, and my family and I had decided to grab some dinner from one of our favorite restaurants — Chili’s. We enjoy Chili’s because of the consistency. You always know what you’re going to get. At the time, my youngest son Jayden was four years old and my oldest son Wesley was eight. Dinner at restaurants is always fun with two little boys with BIG ol’ personalities.

As we were finishing dinner, Jayden stated that he needed to use the restroom. Actually, Jayden loudly announced to us (and to the tables around us) that he needed to “do a *number FOUR*.” I’m thinking to myself, *I don’t even want to ask what a number 4 is. That is a new one for me.* My sweet wife, LaKendria, leaned over and asked Jayden what a number 4 was. Jayden’s extremely loud and bold response was: “Number 4 is diarrhea!” The entire restaurant was laughing. Those attention-grabbing happy birthday chants that restaurant servers do didn’t have anything on my son. Jayden had everyone in the restaurant within earshot cracking up. We couldn’t do anything but laugh; it was an entertaining moment to say the least.

Not only was Jayden entertaining, he provided a valuable lesson. Many times as leaders, pastors, parents, congregants, and spouses we see situations as though only number ones and number twos are available. We can only do things this way or that way — either black or white. The reality is there are many more variations of what we may have originally seen as only a number one or a number two. I often hear people say, “Well, that’s the way we do this or that,” or “It’s our culture,” or “We can’t do this or that,” or “It will never

change, that's just how it is." We can't settle for "That's just the way it is," because we serve a God who is all about, "That's the way it *was*."

Assess → Believe → Change!

We have to learn to change our perspective, change the way we look at things. *If you change your perspective you change the game.* A perspective change will allow you to look for the number 4 option and not simply settle for the way things are. You begin to open your eyes and heart to what could be. You begin to look for that slight variation, because it might be just different enough to make a *big* difference. Some of the world's best success stories and most influential world changers are a result of their willingness to consider the "number 4" option. That's how LifeChurch.tv started video teaching: option number 1 (Craig live), option number 2 (someone other than Craig live), and option number 4 (show a recorded message of Craig). The rest is history, and multisite video teaching venues are popping up all around the world.

That's what this book is about. It's about "the Church" changing its perspective, which will ultimately change the game for the Church as we know it. This book is not about pointing fingers, but it is about speaking the truth and elevating the long overdue conversation of church diversity. The time is NOW and YOU are the change. Are you ready?

Assess → Believe → Change!

A Letter to God

Dear God,

Hey, it's me again! I wanted to write You a letter and share something that has been on my mind; actually it's been on my heart for quite some time. I'm telling You this as though You don't already know. Believe me, I understand that You're Mr. Omniscient and are more than aware of what's churning around inside of my little ol' head.

I've been troubled by this thing for as long as I can remember. "This thing" that I'm referring to is the fact that in the thousands of years that Your Church has been around, Your children just don't seem to get it. You're probably laughing out loud right now and softly saying, "Tell Me something I don't know." There are so many things that we don't understand, but the one thing in particular that has me all jacked up is the seemingly blatant unwillingness of Your children to worship together. You know, the whole — every tribe, every nation, and every tongue that the Bible talks about. Not to mention the Great Commission of making disciples of all nations.

Don't get me wrong, God; Your children do a great job of mixing it up with people of all races in many social and entertainment settings. They will even gather together to worship their favorite sports teams; however, getting together to worship You — not so much! The sad thing is that You probably don't even like most of the sports teams they worship anyway. If I had to guess, I'd probably say that You're a college football fan, think that we need to get rid of the BCS, and that You're ready for a playoff. Nonetheless, it's sad that we still haven't figured out how to get Your people to quit being so segregated on Sunday morning.

I know it must have put a big smile on Your face when, over 40 years ago, one of Your favorite sons — Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. — fought for racial equality in all areas, including the Church. Dr. King even said in one of his speeches, "We have to face the sad fact that on Sunday morning when we stand to sing, we stand in one of the most segregated hours in America." God, here we are over four decades later and not much has changed, and You know what? There are not many people who seem to really care.

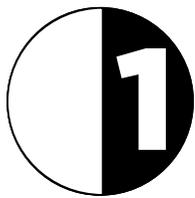
I don't think that smile that Dr. King put on Your face has lasted for over 40 years; as a matter of fact, I bet You're frowning down on us right now. I know that we can do better and shouldn't settle for Your

churches being these segregated institutions with parallel worlds that never seem to intersect. I don't have all of the answers; I actually have more questions than answers. I want to personally thank You for placing this burden of church diversity on my heart.

Again, I know You are probably frowning, and You are not alone. I frown with You. I know that we can do better, but I understand that change doesn't happen overnight. I do know this: we have to start somewhere and maybe that somewhere is right here, right now. Right here being the handoff of the over 40-year-old baton that Dr. King once carried. It's time for this generation of Your children to quit making excuses, to stop settling for comfort, and to cease blaming things on the generations before us. It's easy to make excuses and blame others. The burden for this generation is to look in the mirror, recognize that there is a problem, and understand that by doing nothing about it, WE ARE the problem.

Enough with my rambling, God. Let me go ahead and get to "The Ask." The ask is simply this: "God, please interrupt our lives. Disturb us. Challenge us. Make us dream BIG and think even BIGGER. Break us from the comfort of Church as we know it and help us to see Your Church on the colorful horizon of the future. God, please interrupt our visions of what is for visions of what can be. Let us not be satisfied with normal thoughts — move us into a place of abnormal thinking. God, please interrupt us and make the lack of church diversity an issue for all of us. Make our heart ache for the things that make You frown.

Sincerely,
Scott



The Most Segregated Day of the Week



*The church that marries the spirit of an age
becomes a widow in the next generation.*

— Dean William Inge



Check out video 1

www.nlpg.com/churchdiversity



If you have read or glanced through the foreword and introduction and landed at the beginning of this chapter, I surmise that a few things may be true about you. You're standing in your local bookstore and find yourself curiously drawn to this red book with some dots on it titled *Church Diversity*. Although it's simple, the subtitle, *Sunday — The Most Segregated Day of the Week*, is a brutally honest and gut-wrenching reality. Some of you are skimming through the pages of a friend's copy, while others of you received a copy from someone who said, "You need to read this!" Some of you saw the link online, in a Twitter stream, Facebook update, or some other social media outlet. Those of you who love technology downloaded it to your iPad, Kindle, Nook, or e-reader of choice. No matter what brought you here, you are now at the beginning of a book that will courageously confront the black-and-white-striped pleasantly plump elephant in the pew known as Church Diversity. According to my sons, Wesley and Jayden, pleasantly plump is the politically correct term for *fat*.

Thanks for taking the first step and grabbing this book. My prayer is that you didn't just simply grab a book but that you picked up a piece of a movement. I ask that you journey with me as we ponder and confront this unnecessarily awkward issue that has long been ignored. Put on your seatbelt and remember that there are two exits: the first is right here and another at any page that follows this one. Feel free to exit this journey anytime you please. My hope is that when you land at the end of chapter 8 you will become part of a culture-changing and world-changing movement. *Church Diversity is more than a book — it's a movement of God, pastors, ministry leaders, volunteers, congregants, and the community at large*. This book is a tool that will

foster having the tough conversations and encourage making the decisions that will change the face and heart of the Church. It's a tool to begin the conversation and help the Body Of Christ and ministry leaders to *confront the elephant in the pew*.

Church diversity on the surface may not initially seem like a felt need for everyone. If we dig down deep below the surface and get to the root of the matter, we should understand that "reaching all people for Christ" must be a felt need for the Church, and it can be a beautiful reality. Church diversity is about challenging ourselves to move beyond "what is" to "what will be." I like what the Bible says in Proverbs 16:2, "All a person's ways seem pure to them, but motives are weighed by the LORD."

It's not about the words, stories, controversy, title, or subject matter of this book; it's about the motive. The motive is to truly honor God by developing a movement of people who are willing to do whatever it takes to have His will done on earth as it is in heaven. Every time a group of visionaries begins the process of pointing toward the future and what will be, they begin to smile the smiles of tomorrow, today. That's what we have the opportunity to do; we can begin smiling tomorrow's smiles today. Smile, laugh, and imagine "what will be" as you read the pages of this book.

Part One: Where Have We Been?

It wasn't long ago (September 2009) that I had the opportunity to speak at one of the most unprecedented conferences of our time. The Nines Conference was facilitated by two of America's largest organizations for ministry leaders: Catalyst and Leadership Network. It was the first-ever completely online church conference featuring some of the world's top ministry leaders. Each leader was posed with this question: *If you had just nine minutes to share with church leaders, what would you tell them?* I did not have to blink an eye before I knew what I was going to share — I was going to share what has been burning inside me for quite some time. My plans were to get on the rooftop and yell very loudly, "Church diversity s—ks!" I wasn't going to really get on the rooftop and yell; however, I was going to try to articulate what I think is one of the more clearly visible problems facing the local church — the lack of ethnic diversity. "Church diversity s—s" may offend some of you; however, that was the actual title of my talk. For those who are offended by the title, let me ask you this question: are you offended because this pastor/author used the word "s—ks" or are you instead offended at the harsh reality that church diversity really does s—k in today's world? No one wants to touch this issue with a ten-foot pole, but that

was before “we” took the bold step of beginning the conversation. Not only are we going to begin open dialogue about this issue, but we will also outline solutions designed to make a long-lasting difference.

As I was preparing for my talk for the Nines Conference, I was reflecting on my past experiences, my personal journey in dealing with church diversity, some pertinent historical thoughts, and some local Oklahoma City history that in my opinion parallels the subject. In the 1960s, Oklahoma City was a community that did not welcome black people in their eating establishments and had signs that said NO BLACKS ALLOWED or WHITE ONLY.

There was a group of common, everyday people just like you and me that began to challenge culture on the issues of race and ethnicity of that era. These people had a belief that all restaurants should welcome everyone, no matter the color of their skin. Not only did they believe it, but they also put their money and energy where their hearts and mouths were and they did something about it. These groups of individuals would meet on the lawn of the somewhat run-down, but still standing, Calvary Baptist Church in Oklahoma City, Oklahoma. These meetings were the kickoff and platform for what would become peaceful sit-ins at restaurants throughout Oklahoma City.

During this same period of time, Calvary Baptist Church was looking for a new senior pastor and began to interview a number of different candidates. They brought one candidate to interview who was born and raised in Atlanta, Georgia. Although this candidate was sharp and appeared to have potential, the search committee that met behind closed doors thought that this young seminary graduate was too young and inexperienced to be the senior pastor of Calvary Baptist Church. That young pastoral candidate was Martin Luther King Jr.

It is amazing how each and every decision impacts history. Today’s decisions will impact tomorrow’s realities. The decision for this group of individuals to have peaceful sit-ins in Oklahoma City restaurants would ultimately change the face and heart of Oklahoma City. Each and every restaurant eventually put a sign on the door that said EVERYONE WELCOME. The group of individuals at Calvary Baptist Church that passed on the young seminary graduate obviously impacted their church’s potential in a major way. Seriously, Calvary Baptist Church could have potentially had *the* Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. as their senior pastor. Potential unrealized is just potential.

Dr. King went on to have a platform and support yet to be realized by any other minority leader, including Colin Powell and President Obama. As a

matter of fact, Dr. King might go down as the most influential leader of the last century — period. He became the voice of reason that challenged a nation to no longer settle for the status quo and challenged the existing culture to change. He challenged us to not only have a dream but to make our dreams a reality. He challenged the Church to truly be the Church. In many ways, Dr. King is still the little voice of reason that whispers in our ear and gives us those subtle little reminders when we begin to ask questions like, “Can I (or we) do better?”

One of the most profound statements that Dr. King made over 40 years ago that unfortunately still rings true today is this: “We must face the sad fact that at the eleven o’ clock hour on Sunday morning when we stand to sing, we stand in the most segregated hour in America . . . and the most segregated school is Sunday school.” Ouch! Punch me in the face with a brick! Every time I read that quote I cringe inside. I cringe because we are a nation that has come so far in regard to race relations and racial equality. We have a black president, but when it comes to God’s house or “the Church” we are still missing the mark. That statement made in 1968 is still very real and very true today.

That statement can and will be true 40 years from today if we don’t begin to make mental shifts that I prayerfully hope will result in a heart-shifting movement that will ultimately change the face of the Church. A new and different future begins with the turning of these pages, taking this journey, having these difficult conversations, and addressing this pertinent need.

We are the change. We are the change that impacts our little pockets of the globe that we call our community. God has not only allowed you to be a part of your community, but you have been given the responsibility to influence your little piece of the globe. In no way am I audaciously assuming that you will single-handedly change the world; however, I am bold enough to say that you and I can and will change our own little piece of the world. A little spark is all it takes. As a child, I remember being told that sparks can start fires. That statement could not be more true. That little spark inside of you to “do the right thing” will help to ignite a fire that will change the complexion of the Church. Remember, little sparks can start big fires.

Dr. King’s change began in his little piece of the globe, and before all was said and done, he impacted not just an entire nation but also the entire world. It goes without saying that Jesus’ ministry in Israel was to be the kickoff and the beginning point of what would later be the proclamation and sharing of the gospel to all the peoples of the earth. His journey began impacting His little piece of the globe, and the end result is a ministry that lives, breathes, and

continues to change the world by the second. Small moments of impact over time result in BIG change. We are responsible for making those impactful moments. We are that change!

Pastor Bill Hybels, in his book *Courageous Leadership*, shares one of the most simple but powerful quotes as it relates to changing the world and the hope for the world. Hybels writes, “The local church is the hope of the world and its future rests primarily in the hand of its leaders.”¹ Hybels’ quote is quite profound and comes with a great deal of responsibility for each and every one of us.

We have all been empowered by God to leave our little piece of the world different than when we found it. There is a responsibility to change, to have tough conversations, to make tough decisions, and to move past the Nobel Peace Prize–winning platitudes of “hope” and “change.” We cannot just talk about the change, but instead we must be the change. We must be the carriers and manufacturers of the dreams.

When Dr. King so eloquently shared his dreams in the famous “I Have a Dream” speech, he shared his dreams that “little black boys and black girls will be able to join hands with little white boys and white girls as sisters and brothers.” We are still dreaming and that dream still has not come true for the Church. I don’t mean to speak on behalf of God, but I believe that the lack of effort on our part to come together breaks His heart. It’s time to *move beyond the dream*. It’s time to move beyond the status quo —in both the way we think and the actions we take.

It’s become the “new normal” for sporting events, concerts, and other arenas to be filled with worshiping fans of all races, holding hands, cheering, yelling, shouting, and worshiping together. Unfortunately, that is not the “new normal” in God’s House — the local church. Don’t get me wrong; I acknowledge the fact that there are pockets of churches around the country that have figured out what it means to embrace diversity instead of tolerating it, and we will take an in-depth look at some of those churches and hear some of the stories of those leaders in chapter 5. We will develop an understanding of how these small stories affect the BIG picture. Unfortunately, these churches and leaders are the slim exception and should be the wide rule. Instead of settling for a few success stories, let’s make the heart of these slim exceptions pave the way for the future of the Church — a future that looks totally different than the current reality.

The Early Church

In the Book of Acts, the Bible provides a vivid illustration of the importance of diversity in the early church, as well as outlining the controversy it can

bring. Jesus' last words (Acts 1:8) were all about diversity and multi-ethnicity. Jesus corrected the disciples' question about restoring the kingdom to Israel, instead reminding them of their responsibility of witnessing the gospel and that their witness was not just to Israel but the world. In Acts 1:8 Jesus said, "But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth." This is the theme for all of Acts. The first day of the church was strategic when Jerusalem was crowded with multi-ethnicity. There were not only Jewish pilgrims but local residents and devout men from every nation under heaven (Acts 2:5–11). The first church-wide controversy and conflict was about church diversity and multi-ethnicity — the Jerusalem Council (Acts 15).

Let's take a look at Scripture at a time when Jesus had just been crucified, rose again, and then ascended to the heavens. Shortly after these events, believers began to meet, giving us a glimpse of what the early Church looked like. Follow along in Acts 2:42–47 as we look at the interactions of the early Church and the original Church culture of celebrating diversity. This Acts 2 church was the first church to truly have a sign on the door that read EVERYONE WELCOME!

They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. *Everyone* was filled with awe at the many wonders and signs performed by the apostles. *All the believers were together* and had *everything in common*. They sold property and possessions to give to *anyone* who had need. Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, praising God and enjoying the favor of *all the people*. And the Lord added to their number *daily* those who were being saved (Acts 2:42–47, emphasis added).

This Scripture is lined with inclusive words and phrases, such as "everyone," "all the believers," "everything in common," "all the people," "anyone," and so forth. The early church was on to something, as all the believers were together and they had everything in common. The "everything" that they had in common was Jesus.

A lot has happened since the early days of the church as described in the Book of Acts; however, the heart behind this first-century Christian Church should be the same heart that beats in the local church today. The heartbeat of the Church today is in need of a pacemaker to get back in rhythm and to set the pace for generations to come.

Where Have I Been?

Now that we've gotten a small glimpse into the early Church during biblical times and during the Civil Rights movement, I think it's appropriate for me to share who I am and where I've been. Who is Scott Williams and what gives him the street-cred (i.e., credibility) to write on this subject? I happen to be an African American male who grew up in the small town of Claremore just outside of Tulsa, Oklahoma. I attended a small "black Baptist church" in Claremore during my childhood years. As I got older my church attendance was what I would categorize as loose attendance. Our connections to the local church were, for the most part, "on again, off again."

As a teenager I would often attend church with some of my white teenage friends at what would stereotypically be categorized as a traditional "white Baptist church." I actually made the decision to commit my life to Christ as a teenager while attending one of those white Baptist churches with some friends. From an early age I had these bi-polar experiences relating to the ethnic make-up of church congregations. I grew up being *somewhat* welcomed in the "white Baptist church" youth group and *very* welcomed at my traditional "black Baptist church." I'm not exactly sure why that was the case. I think this was primarily due to the fact that I was one of the few black kids in a seemingly all-white community.

I was a known commodity and not the norm in the eyes of many. What is the norm anyway? I had come to realize that my view was not the same as that of my peers, the community, or even other cities around me. Although I felt somewhat welcomed, my eyes provided a snapshot of the challenges facing a nation as it relates to true racial reconciliation. People are quick to tolerate diversity; however, they are not so quick to truly embrace it and celebrate it. Embrace diversity. Don't just tolerate it.

Thinking back to my childhood, I believe that I have always had this ability to play in both courts, the stereotypical black courts and the stereotypical white courts. I embraced diversity even though people in both courts didn't always embrace my Rodney King "can't we all just get along" nature. I would receive awkward looks and comments from members of the "white churches" that communicated, *Why are you here? You don't really belong here. Shouldn't you be worshiping on the other side of the tracks?*

On the other hand, my black friends would call me an Oreo (black on the outside, white on the inside) for attending white churches and associating with the white kids. There is a phrase that applies to this context: "Too white to be

black and too black to be white.” I definitely wouldn’t categorize myself that way; however, some naive people might. If I was going to be classified as an Oreo, I at least better be a Double Stuf Oreo, because the Double Stuf Oreo was the new Oreo that changed the game for Oreos as we knew it. Since the Oreo with double stuff was introduced, Oreo cookies now have many different varieties: Original, Double Stuf, Golden Uh-Oh with Chocolate Creme, Milk Chocolate Covered, 100 Calorie Oreos, Golden Original, Soft Cakesters Peanut Butter Creme, Golden Mini, Cakesters, Fudgees Chocolate Fudge Filling, Milk Chocolate Covered Mint, Chocolate Mini To Go Pack, and my favorite of course, the Variety 12 Pack. These Oreo flavors are somewhat representative of the different flavors of the Church. We shouldn’t focus on our flavorful differences; instead we should realize the combination of different flavors is what makes all things good — just as the fact that all God’s children are uniquely made illustrates the beauty represented by every nation and every tongue.

Those Oreo comments are seared into my memory. As I type these pages I vividly remember the ignorance and the naivety of those days. I have always believed that we could all “just get along.” Deep down inside I have always been that double-stuffed Oreo wanting to be the game changer for Oreo cookies as we know them.

Enough with the Oreo analogy. But that leads into my next area of life experience.

Change Your Perspective, Change the Game

If you’re like me and you’ve read this far about the lack of church diversity, you’re ready to get to the point and learn the fix. I ask that you continue to journey with me and allow me to provide some context from my perspective. I believe it will not only shine a light on the problem, it will outline solutions and initiate a movement, a movement of people who are willing to Move Beyond the Dream. Life is all about perspective, so let’s get some perspective.

In the summer of 1990, this small-town Claremore boy moved to the Big City of Tulsa, Oklahoma. Tulsa was definitely different from what I was used to. I made more black friends in a month than I had my entire life. New friends, new experiences, and an altogether new world. Although I lived in Tulsa, for a while I made the 25-minute commute to Claremore so I could finish my senior year of high school with the students I had grown up with. Here again I had these bi-polar experiences of hanging with the “boys in the hood” in Tulsa and my friends in small-town Claremore, where I was one of six black students in a graduating class of about 300. I came to realize that the only difference between

the two groups was their unique perspectives. It was their particular set of circumstances and situations that affected their outlook.

One person's perspective will lead him to call someone else an Oreo. Another perspective will lead a group to look at someone funny who walks into their church and doesn't look like them. Yet another perspective will lead a group of Baptist church leaders to say that a non-denominational seeker church is not a real church, or it will lead a group of Christians around the globe to settle for pews filled with the same hues. The great thing about perspective is that it's experiential and it can be changed. Change your perspective, change the game!

I remember sitting through one of our LifeChurch.tv Partnership Experiences (aka Membership Class) one evening in January 2010, and those attending the class were sharing what they loved about LifeChurch.tv. The responses that we get during these experiences are generally the same; however, this particular evening one of the guys said something different. He was a young newlywed whose wedding ceremony I had performed a few days prior to this event. He made this statement: "The thing I love about this campus is the diversity. I was raised in a 'Podunk' Oklahoma town where people were just ignorant. It was nothing but white people, and I was ignorant as well. I love the diversity that's at this church and the diversity on stage during the weekend. It's changed my perspective; it's changed the way I look at life, people, and God."

Again, perspective is experiential and it can be changed. *Change your perspective, change the game!*

Those College Days

When I graduated from high school in 1991, my mom gave me three options: (1) join the military, (2) go to work, or (3) go to college. Since going to college seemed to be the least difficult and most appealing of the three, I decided to go to college on an academic scholarship to the University of Central Oklahoma, in the Oklahoma City suburb of Edmond. When I first moved to Edmond, I couldn't stand it, and now I love it. It is amazing how time and experience change perspective. Hmm. That seems to be the theme of life: *Time and experience change perspective. Change your perspective, change the game!* Today you couldn't pay me to move from Edmond. Well, you COULD actually pay me, but you would just have to pay a lot. I sit in my office right now, typing these pages from the great suburb of Edmond.

As a young man living in the dorms I had a deep desire to do something great. By living in the dorms, I was afforded the opportunity to meet a lot of

interesting people and had a wide range of roommates. I had one roommate who was a country boy from Ponca City, Oklahoma. He would do the nastiest thing: he dipped tobacco. And what was worse was his overall tobacco-dipping process. He would roll some toilet paper up and put it in the bottom of an empty 20-ounce soda pop bottle and spit his sloppy brown dip in it. I'm sorry, but walking around with a bottle of spit is just nasty. The following semester I had another roommate on the opposite end of the you've-gotta-be-kidding-me continuum. When I walked into my dorm room on the first day of the semester he said, "What's up, blood? Are you a Crip?" Say what? . . . "No sir, I'm a psychology major." The unique thing about being in the Bible Belt in Oklahoma is the fact that even gang members go to church. Go figure!

It was a crazy time in my life, as I found myself hanging out with, going to the homes, and visiting the churches of all these different people: churches in the rural parts of Oklahoma, where I got the "Boy, what are you doing here?" look; charismatic-running-down-the-aisles-with-streamers-falling-out churches; traditional black churches that my roommates attended; a big, rich "white church" (and I'm not describing the color of the paint on the building); and the list goes on and on. You name the type of church, and I bet you that I visited it.

I would ask myself the same question every time I walked through the doors of a new church: "Do I feel welcome here?" That's the same question people coming through your church's doors every single Sunday are asking. Over the years, I could never get a clear answer to that question. If the answer is generally no or kinda-sorta — therein lies a deeper problem. I was always convinced that there was a deeper question that needed to be addressed.

The Shoeshine Man

Our experiences today shape our lives tomorrow. As I was trying to formulate a plan for where God would have me and my future family attend church, I continued to ponder that deeper unanswered question. What questions did I, or God's people in general, need to be asking? The heart behind that deeper unanswered question would be revealed to me, and it would come from one of the most unlikely places. Where, you may ask? The Shoeshine Man.

At the time, I was going to a great Spirit-filled African American church, and I remember needing to get my shoes shined. I always felt like I needed to be really sharp and dressed to a T when I attended this particular church. One afternoon I stopped by the local full-service carwash, and just like I always did, I got my shoes shined while waiting for my car to be cleaned. It's amazing the

wisdom that you can glean from the local old-school shoeshine man. This particular shoeshine man's name was "Slim." Slim was an elderly black man who stood about six foot four with a jerry curl. (In case you don't know what that is, it's like the hair you saw in the movie *Coming to America*, with drippy juice that will leave a stain on your wall if he rubbed against it.) Slim was very tall and very slender . . . go figure. I'm sure Slim was his nickname, but that was his official name to me and every other customer.

As Slim and I talked about life during the course of my shoeshine, we somehow got on the subject of church and religion. I explained to him my frustrations and experience as it relates to the Church. I told him that I was looking for a church home, one that I could truly settle down in and one day raise a family in. Slim began to tell me about his church, and many of his descriptions brought back memories of the things that I liked from my previous church experiences. There were always different things that seemed to connect me to God in the churches that I had previously attended. Once Slim finished describing his church, I began to get excited and thought to myself, *Wow, this sounds like a place for me!*

My next question to Slim was this: "Is it a white church or a black church?" No sooner than the words came out of my mouth, Slim responded with words that I will never forget. He said: "Young man, that is the stupidest question you can ever ask. It's not a black church, it's not a white church, it's God's church. It doesn't matter what you look like. That's what's wrong with the Church today. So-called Christians are so worried about whether all of the faces of the congregation match their own that they miss the part about making sure their hearts match up with the heart of Jesus."

Ouch! Punch me in the face with two bricks. Those words wrecked me, but they wrecked me in a good way and I hope that they wreck you. I pray that God will use the pages of this book and the context of your experiences to *change the face and heart of the church*. Just like Slim said, my hope is that the heart of the Church will be less worried about whether the faces of the congregation match their own or things are done the way they always have been, and instead are more focused on making sure their hearts match up with the heart of Jesus and the heart of the early church in the Book of Acts. Just as the groups of individuals that orchestrated the peaceful sit-ins in Oklahoma City restaurants during the Civil Rights movement had a desire for everyone to truly be welcomed in every restaurant. Due to small impactful moments and demonstrations, the signs in Oklahoma City restaurants were eventually changed to read EVERYONE WELCOME.

In another chapter I'll talk more about the church that I eventually attended and whether or not it was the church Slim was referring to.

Slim's comment changed my perspective and the way I thought about many things. Here I was, the guy who had the luxury of experiencing life in both worlds by playing "lifeball" on both the black and the white courts — and I was still missing the mark. I wasn't doing anything with my perspective; I wasn't doing anything with my experience. I committed from that point to not only "talk about it" but also "be about it" and put my "change money" where my "action mouth" was. I was going to be the Oreos with double stuff. I was going to be part of game-changing movements.

Prison Politics and the Pulpit

Let me share a little more of my personal story and testimony. I have not always been a pastor, and I have not always been a part of these game-changing movements that I'm referring to. As a matter of fact, I spent 11 years, 44 days, and 8 hours of my adult life in the prison system. It was as crazy as you can imagine: 8 x 10 cell, razor wire, bad food, pent-up anger . . . PRISON. Relax. I was actually a warden in the prison system. Why does a brother always have to be in the prison system? Unfortunately, some people did not even make it to this sentence as they said to themselves, "I'm not reading a book from a convict." For everyone else, the curious nature of human beings propelled you to read on. Thanks for doing so.

My first opportunity to have a major impact in the areas of race and ethnicity came in my mid-twenties. I was hired as one of the youngest prison wardens in the country. Prison wardens in their twenties, thirties, or forties are hard to come by; however, I had a leader who took a risk on me and would not settle for the status quo. This new role provided me the opportunity to make strategic hires and implement systems that would bridge the dotted lines of racial equality and connectedness behind the razor wire and cinder block of prison walls. If you think the Church is segregated, you need to spend some time on a prison yard. But since I don't recommend doing what my inmate friends did to get behind the walls, you can try being a volunteer or simply take a tour. I promise your overall experience will be better than if you take the criminal route!

I made small impacts and small changes over a period of time that had big results on an entire inmate and staff community. We had inmates of all different races eating together, engaging in recreational activities together, and even attending religious services together. We had staff members from rural Oklahoma who had never had any interaction with anyone other than "country

white-folk,” as they would refer to themselves. The other end of the spectrum consisted of staff members who were a few years removed from living “la vida loca,” otherwise known as living the crazy life in the hood, and wanted to go into correctional vocation to make a difference.

I could actually write an entire book about crazy, awkward stories of uncomfortable and even life-threatening interactions based on race behind prison walls. Although it wasn’t easy, we were able to make a diverse group of staff members work hand in hand toward a common goal. As we began to have the awkward, difficult conversations about race and ethnicity, we made diversity an issue worth talking about, and the result was a correctional institution that was recognized nationally for teamwork and for providing exemplary care for its inmate population. I learned a tremendous amount about race relations behind cinder block and razor wire.

My second major splash that made an impact in the area of bridging the lines of race and ethnicity came in the arena of politics. For the record, my heart is not to share politics, nor to mix politics and the Church; my intent is only to share my experiences to provide perspective. Please read the next few pages with that in mind. As we talk about traditions in the Church and people settling for stereotypes and the status quo, politics is definitely in the same boat.

As a young black man I was supposed to be a Democrat and vote a Democratic party line, right? That’s just what you do in today’s society. But I decided to take all of my life experience and perspective and make a decision for myself based upon my beliefs and my values, whether they were good or bad, right or wrong. I wanted to make my own educated, calculated, and appropriately contextual decisions. After much thought, consideration, prayer, and research, I did the unthinkable and I changed my political party affiliation. I became a Republican, a “Black Republican.” (Insert: boos, smiles, applause, and shock and awe thoughts.) Not only did I change my party affiliation, but I also committed to putting my money (heart) where my mouth (action) was.

I began to spread the word and challenge people to evaluate their beliefs, experiences, and perspectives differently. I had a mentor in this area who had changed his political party affiliation a few years prior. His name was Currie Ballard and he was well known and respected nationally as a voice for black people. Currie was a historian and a nationally known collector of African American artifacts. He won an Emmy for a documentary that he made on the life of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. In other words, Currie had the street-cred to be a Black Republican without having the Oreo tag.

Currie and I began to meet with the local party leadership in Oklahoma about raising awareness and confronting the other pleasantly plump elephant in the political pews: the general lack of black people and minorities involved in the Republican Party. We began to meet, raise awareness, advocate, provide a visible minority presence, and educate the public. We worked hard year after year to encourage people to be independent thinkers and not settle for the status quo. Our willingness to address issues of race and politics provided an outlet for people to begin to change their perspective.

In 2000 President George W. Bush received 4 percent of the black vote in Oklahoma. After small pushes, meetings, and challenges at the highest levels of the political arena, a group of independent minority thinkers began to make changes. We partnered with Oklahoma Republican Party leaders to challenge the system as it was. We were all a part of challenging an entire state to change. Four years later, President George W. Bush went on to receive nearly 20 percent of the black vote in the 2004 election. This was the highest percentage of swing for any state, and national party leaders began to contact Oklahoma State Party Chairman Gary Jones to try and figure out Oklahoma's strategy. Gary's strategy was simple: "The Republican party has a history of embracing diversity that seems to have gotten lost over the years. I want our party to be inclusive, so we had to make sure that we got the right people at the table and began having the right conversations and implementing the right strategies."

New York, New York — Big City of Dreams

The same year President Bush had the huge swing in the number of black votes he received, I had the privilege of being nominated as one of the first black delegates to the Republican National Convention from the state of Oklahoma. The icing on the cake was that the convention was being held in New York City. The NYPD had a Fort Knox security plan in place for convention delegates and attendees. I remember being on the Oklahoma delegation tour bus and looking out the window while we were on our way to the venue. I wasn't surprised to find out that not everyone in the melting pot was happy to see us. Some of the signs protestors held up, along with some of the chants, gave me the impression that they had some problems with the Republican Party and President Bush's leadership. I can't even include here the things people held up and shared in the name of free speech and civil disobedience. Nonetheless we kept rolling and the wheels on the bus went 'round and 'round. This was a big deal moment and the seriousness was evident from the real deal NYPD police hats, AK-47s, and officers on horses. This was definitely one of those experiences that engaged all five of your senses.

Once we finally arrived, I recall walking through the doors of the Republican National Convention and sitting on the floor of Madison Square Garden thinking, *This is pretty cool and I'm not even here to see the Knicks play.* I was soaking up all of the nostalgia — everything from hearing Mayor Rudi Giuliani, gospel artist Donnie McClurkin, Vice President Cheney, and a host of others speakers that performed on the big stage. The place was electric when they introduced the Governor from the state of California. Arnold Schwarzenegger brought the energy that this event was looking for, and he brought the house down with this classic Terminatoresque phrase.

Moments like this one reminded me of the words of Rodney King — “Can’t we all just get along?” — and the words of the shoeshine man (paraphrasing), “There is not a political party for black people or white people, but they are both God’s party.” It’s not necessarily the political parties that are jacked up, but rather that man makes our political parties imperfect. If we look back at the drastic change in the number of black votes President Bush received, it’s important to remember that it wasn’t as if 16 percent of the people went and changed their political party, it simply meant that 16 percent of the people changed the way they thought and changed the way they voted.

The premise of “moving beyond the dream” isn’t designed for your church to go from being 100 percent white, Hispanic, or Asian church to a diverse church playing an entirely different genre of worship music overnight. The heart behind this movement is for any church, no matter the ethnic make-up, to begin the process of changing the way they think. Changing your perspective is the critical factor. In order for the Republican Party to be effective at going into every voting precinct and sharing their good political news with everyone, it was critical for them to be intentional in their efforts to be more racially inclusive. The Republican Party made a decision to have the awkward conversation and address the “hanging chad” of an elephant in the voting booth. The Republican Party had a perspective problem, and national party leadership made a commitment to change the perspective of the voting populous. The end result was the Republican National Convention having more minority delegates in 2004 than in the history of the Republican Party. Personally, I believe the drastic change was due to many groups of independent thinkers challenging the status quo and inspiring people in Oklahoma and around the country to change the way they think.

Over time, small impact made big change. The Republican Party, which was stereotypically thought of as “the most segregated party,” was openly making

changes to intentionally change the overall party perspective. That's the goal of church diversity: challenging people to change the way they think and the way they look at God's church. It should be a crime for Sunday to continue to remain the most segregated day of the week. As a matter of fact, it's almost offensive that the most creative, living, breathing, chosen vessel of the gospel can't seem to see past the complacent rut of church segregation.

As a "Black Republican" activist, I was truly able to be a part of a movement that affected a small piece of our national history: more black Republicans, more minority Republicans, more minorities in Republican leadership, more minority cabinet positions at the White House, more independent thinkers, and more importantly, more people challenging the status quo. The ripple effects of that 2004 movement have resulted in the Republican Party having the first African American party chair in 2008, former Lt. Governor of Maryland Michael Steele. The Church has to have the same mindset that State Republican Party Chairman Gary Jones had for the state Republican Party: if we want our Church to be inclusive and truly reach all people for Christ, we must get the right people to the table, have the right conversations, pray the right prayers, and change the face of the Church.

My experiences in Republican politics didn't necessarily have the same impact on our nation as Dr. King did. It didn't even have the impact that I believe this book will have on our nation; nonetheless, it did have an impact on an entire nation. That impact provides a clear illustration of how a group of individuals focused and committed to doing the right thing can have the right impact. Everything we do in life will have some sort of impact. It's not important to simply have an impact, but rather to have the right impact. There is a different kind of impact that a batter has when he hits a foul ball, as compared to hitting a ball that's going, going, and gone deep into center-field for a home run! We are called to have the right kind of impact. We may hit some foul balls; however, if we keep our eyes on the ball, over time we will hit the sweet spot.

I believe the right impact includes embracing the reality that all races can and should worship together. We must fight for not settling for the status quo, especially as it relates to race and ethnicity. Not only do I believe that you shouldn't settle, but I believe that you should put your money where your mouth is. I'm putting my money where my mouth is as I write the pages of this book. You are going to be challenged to put your money where your mouth is as you read the pages of this book.

We have established that church diversity is definitely an area that needs to be addressed and should be a felt need for all Christians — but where do we go from here? If the Church wants to truly connect with a lost and broken world, it must change and stop being stuck on the past. Churches that remain stuck with the spirit that believes that diversity doesn't matter, diversity is not a big deal, and church diversity is a non-issue will be totally left behind. We have come so far from the time when people couldn't vote because of the color of their skin. We actually live in a day and age where arguably the best rapper is white, the best golfer is black, the NBA center with the most potential was Asian, and the quarterback for America's team, the Dallas Cowboys, is Hispanic. I mention all this in order to show that the world is evolving in a good way as it relates to the issues of diversity outside of the four walls of the Church; however, the Church is at a red light. The brilliant Dean Inge of St. Paul's, London, said it best when he said, "The church that marries the spirit of an age becomes a widow in the next generation." The Church is the Bride of Christ and she shouldn't be the widow to any of His people. The time is now and we are the people.

The chapters to come will provide practical insights from my experiences at LifeChurch.tv and experiences with some of the top ministry leaders in the country, including Craig Groeschel. We will also take a look at the organizational playbooks of diversity-leading corporations like Coca-Cola and J. W. Marriot. Today church diversity is just a dream, a figment of our imagination. Tomorrow we will begin to "move beyond the dream" and make it a practical reality.



CHURCH DIVERSITY CHALLENGE 1

What is your personal history as it relates to issues of race and ethnicity?

How have your experiences shaped your belief as it relates to diversity?

Are you willing to be a part of the solution to affect positive change?

Endnotes

1. Bill Hybels, *Courageous Leadership* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2009).