TIMOTHY KELLER

GOSPEL-CENTERED CITY MINISTRY

The City to City DNA

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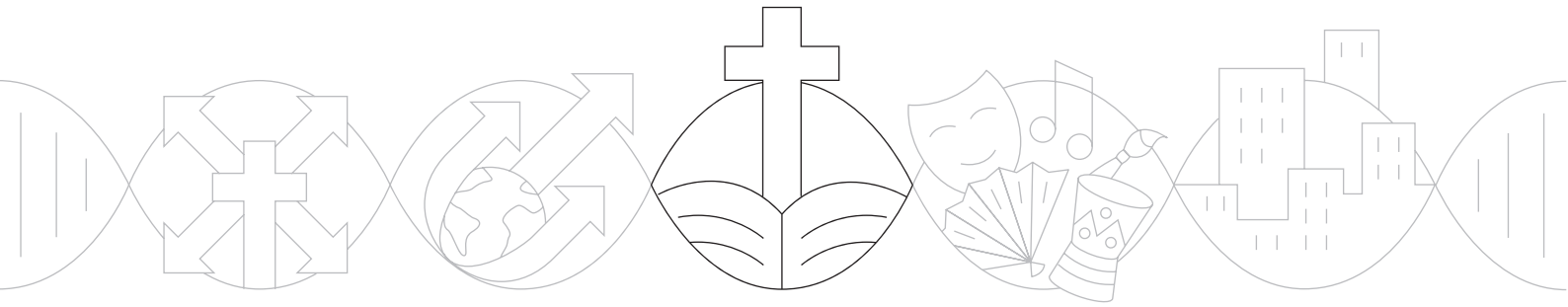
Introduction

Gospel-Centered City Ministry: The City to City DNA aims to cultivate a deeper understanding of the core values of Redeemer City to City. In eighteen white papers, organization founder Timothy Keller elaborates on five key concepts—gospel, culture, city, mission, and movement—that motivate City to City's work of planting churches, engaging culture, and catalyzing movement around the world.

City to City's hope is that church leaders across the globe will evaluate these DNA principles, dialogue with others about how they can be contextualized for ministry in their cities, and work together to serve a greater gospel movement. Through robust discussions with Christians around the world, we can collectively have a stronger grasp on the biblical principles found within the DNA outlined here and pass it on to the church of tomorrow.



Gospel

Because the gospel provides a comprehensive perspective on all of life, we:

- *Rely on the Holy Spirit for personal and corporate renewal.*
- *Apply the gospel of Jesus to every area of our life and ministry.*
- *Proclaim and demonstrate the good news that, through Christ's work on our behalf, God rescues sinners and renews creation.*
- *Celebrate and preach Jesus as the fulfillment of the whole Bible.*

PART ONE

Grace

Of the five major topics City to City's DNA papers cover, the gospel is the most fundamental. The gospel is the crucial foundation to everything the church is meant to accomplish. Indeed, the church's *greatest* treasure is the holy gospel of God's grace to us. Therefore, we must never assume that we can effectively work within the kingdom of God without a firm understanding of the way God operates. All other topics in City to City's DNA are derived entirely from this understanding—discussing things such as cultural contextualization or city theology without experiencing what the gospel says about them would produce an incomplete treatment at best and a fundamentally misguided one at worst.

Our study of the gospel must be thorough. It should be one that goes far beyond the scope of these papers. While our DNA 3.0 papers offer helpful summaries of God's grace, God's kingdom, and what we call "gospel renewal," they are brief steps on a long journey. Learning God's ways (and especially *applying* them to ourselves) is a continual effort that spans our whole lives. As 1 Peter 1:10–12 tells us, even angels always long to revisit the gospel and see its truths. How much more do we humans need to immerse ourselves in godly knowledge!

To help deepen our understanding of the gospel, it is useful to start by examining what can only be described as one of God's most defining characteristics: his grace.

THE CONCEPT OF SALVATION

In order to talk about God's saving grace, we must first acknowledge that we need to be saved by it. One of the gospel's key principles is "salvation," or the idea that each of us is broken and needs to be saved from our sin and idolatry. Interestingly enough, the majority of people who seek salvation today do not think of themselves as someone who seeks salvation. But they feel the need for it regardless. In his book *A Secular Age*, Charles Taylor explains the experience of desiring a "fullness" in our lives that is not there, of aching for a life that could be and should be far better than it is now.[1] While most would not call this "seeking salvation," virtually all of us acknowledge that the world is not as it ought to be, that human beings are not what they ought to be, and, usually, that *I* am not all I ought to be. The present-day, therapeutic culture of the West may teach that our dissatisfaction with life stems largely from societal problems outside of ourselves rather than our own inner failings, but there remains an undeniable emphasis on the need for liberation. In short, there is nearly universal agreement that there is a need for some kind of salvation. But there is no

[1] Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009), 5.

agreement on what has caused that need, what will meet that need, and what hope there is for us to ever actually be saved.

THREE KINDS OF NEWS

For now, we'll call the reason we need salvation "the bad news," the cure "the good news," and our hope to obtain this cure "the great news." The gospel provides illuminating answers for each of these. In order to see how, let's study two examples of gospel presentations.

Most presenters of the gospel do so by following one of two outlines. The first is a more topic-focused method, which states something like this: "First, there was God. Then, sin entered the world. Then, Christ died for our sins. Now, we profess our faith in Christ to experience his saving power." The second method outlines the arcs in the biblical story: "First, there was Creation. Then, humanity experienced the Fall. Then, we were offered Redemption. Now, we may experience Restoration." Regardless of which method a presenter of the gospel leans toward, the essential core that should be present in any gospel outline is addressing the bad news, the good news, and the great news. More specifically, it should show that salvation comes from God's free grace rather than our moral efforts, from Christ's life and death rather than our own life or death, and from weakness and self-sacrifice rather than strength and self-interest. The result is a new creation of us as individuals, as well as the whole world.

Let's take a closer look at how a gospel presentation can address the three types of news regarding salvation.

THE BAD NEWS

First, the bad news is that we are separated from God. This is evidenced by the fact that we are all (even non-religious people) trying to save ourselves by looking to an assortment of things for salvation instead of looking to God. We do this both corporately (as classes, races, and families) and individually. We look for salvation psychologically (such as placing our hope in our talent or intelligence), socially (such as placing our hope in a group of friends or a spouse), politically (such as placing our hope in a particular party's agenda), and in many other ways. But the *real* evidence of our separation from God is that we are unsuccessful in saving ourselves. While basing our self-worth on our finances, race, or talents may bring us a sense of temporary gratification, they will never be enough to make us truly feel we are saved. No matter who we are or where we are on the social ladder, we will always feel a longing for salvation if we are separated from God.

Why are we separated from God in the first place? After Creation, mankind allowed sin into the world, which led to its sense of brokenness that we still feel today. Sin continues to operate at the individual level (for example, a greedy person who can never have enough money) and the societal level (such as unjust systems that exploit one group to enrich another). The barrier between

us and God is both subjective and objective. It is subjective because our hearts are enslaved to false saviors, which alienates our affections from him. It is objective because we owe God a debt for our sin that we cannot repay, and his judicious acknowledgment of sin's consequences separates us from him. This means we can only be saved by grace alone.

Because we were created by God to know and love him supremely, our failure to do this not only alienates us from him but also ruins the way all of our other relationships were intended to work. How we relate to ourselves, to others, and to the world is flawed and in deep need of restoration—something we all feel as we live out each day. The gospel identifies the bad news that sin ruins the world, and we cannot save ourselves in the slightest, despite our constant efforts to find salvation.

THE GOOD NEWS

But the gospel is also good news. Namely, it professes that through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, God has done everything necessary for us to be *wholly* saved by him and his free grace. We receive absolution (and much more) when we trust in Christ as savior. To grasp this, we must first grasp the dynamic of "substitution." Out of all of the humans who have ever lived throughout history, Jesus Christ alone lived the perfect life we should have lived. He alone earned the divine blessing that such a life would merit—and then he died the death we should have died, taking the curse and punishment we deserve. He did all of these things in our place. Because he was treated as we deserve, we can be treated by God as *Jesus deserves.* This is a salvation by sheer grace and gift.

Scripture describes this exchange in many places. Below are a few examples:

> For Christ also suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, to bring you to God.
>
> 1 PETER 3:18

> "For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many."
>
> MARK 10:45

> Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us, for it is written: "Cursed is everyone who is hung on a pole." He redeemed us in order that the blessing given to Abraham might come to the Gentiles through Christ Jesus, so that by faith we might receive the promise of the Spirit.
>
> GALATIANS 3:13–14

> God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.
>
> 2 CORINTHIANS 5:21

As New Testament theologian Murray Harris says, "As a result of God's imputing to Christ something that was extrinsic to him, namely sin, believers have something imputed to them that was extrinsic to them, namely righteousness."[2] God can now see us as he would if we were already perfect, resurrected, and seated with Christ in heaven. Notice how Ephesians 2:6 uses past tense when it says, "And God raised us up with Christ and seated us with him in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus." It staggers the imagination!

Richard Hooker, an English priest and theologian in the sixteenth century, describes salvation in Christ like this:

> Such we are in the sight of God the Father as is the very Son of God Himself. Let it be counted as folly or frenzy or fury or whatsoever. It is our wisdom and our comfort; we care for no knowledge in the world but this: that man hath sinned, and God hath suffered; that God hath made Himself the sin of man, and that men are made the righteousness of God.[3]

By sacrificing himself on the cross for our sins, Jesus took the curse and punishment that our lives deserve. We get the blessings and honor that his life deserved. Through this selfless exchange, God can be both just and the justifier of those who believe. We are not just forgiven for our brokenness, but accepted unconditionally in light of Christ's efforts to redeem us. The gospel is good news because our salvation is accomplished completely by Jesus, not us—good news, indeed, since we are incapable of accomplishing it on our own! And so, in addition to our need to be saved by grace alone, we must be saved by Christ alone.

THE GREAT NEWS

Last, there is the great news: if we repent and believe—if we transfer our trust from our alternate ways of salvation to Christ—all the reconciliation Jesus made available through his sacrifice can be obtained by us. When we dedicate ourselves to Christ, and the Father now regards us as having "the righteousness of God" because of the cross, he sends the Holy Spirit into our lives. The Spirit remakes our hearts, character, and eventually the whole heavens and earth, creating a place with no suffering, evil, injustice, and death.

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[2] M. J. Harris, *The Second Epistle to the Corinthians* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2005), 455–456.

[3] Richard Hooker, *A Learned Discourse on Justification* (originally published 1585), available at https://www.ccel.org/ccel/h/hooker/just/cache/just.pdf.

The resurrection of Jesus brings the future power of God and his kingdom to renew us now. This means not just a new individual life but also incorporation into a new community—the church—that reflects this future new creation. The gospel is great news because of what will happen *in* us and what will happen *through* us in the world after we embrace it.

The gospel, to the degree it is grasped, believed, and lived out, results in uniquely and profoundly changed relationships.

First, we see God differently. Our relationship with God becomes one with a Father, someone we no longer obey only out of duty but out of joy. We see God's law as neither a burden nor a way to salvation, but as wise rules for life and a guide toward achieving *shalom* (peace, wholeness, and harmony) in our community. We are liberated to obey God not because we have to in order to go to heaven but out of a grateful joy and a desire to please and resemble the One who saved us at infinite cost to himself. It's something we *want* to do. As one of William Cowper's eighteenth-century hymns goes:

> To see the law by Christ fulfilled
> And hear his pard'ning voice
> Changes a slave into a child,
> And duty into choice.[4]

Second, we see ourselves differently. Our own self-regard improves as we see ourselves as accepted and adopted, as well as our self-knowledge, which now understands how sin has been rooted in our heart and how we have opted to chase idols instead of strengthening a vital faith in Christ.

Third, we see others differently. We see people as family, neighbors, and fellow sinners rather than figures to idolize or demonize. We see society as a place of service and witness, not somewhere to win power struggles, nor a hateful place from which to withdraw, nor merely a place to pass through and ignore on our way to heaven. We see the church as a new humanity instead of a means of salvation or unnecessary baggage. We free ourselves from treating politics in absolute, semi-religious terms; and treat work as a means of loving God and neighbor instead of a necessary evil or indicator of our self-worth. The gospel creates countercultural attitudes toward sex, money, and power, helping us handle them with wisdom instead of selfishness.

Lastly, we see the whole world differently. The created, material earth becomes a good, but fallen, place; and its pleasures and comforts are to be neither vilified nor worshiped. It is only partially—yet still substantially—present in the Holy Spirit, keeping Christians from becoming defeated pessimists or naïve optimists with regard to what can be accomplished in the history to come.

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[4] William Cowper, Olney Hymn 62: "Dependence."

These changes may sound idealistic, but the power of the gospel gives us hope that, over time, they *can* be realized when we dedicate our faith to God. We can only be saved by grace alone, by Christ alone, and by faith alone.

In summation, conveying the gospel includes some version of these three ideas:

1. We are lost in our pursuit of self-salvation. We rely on disordered loves that cannot save us at all.

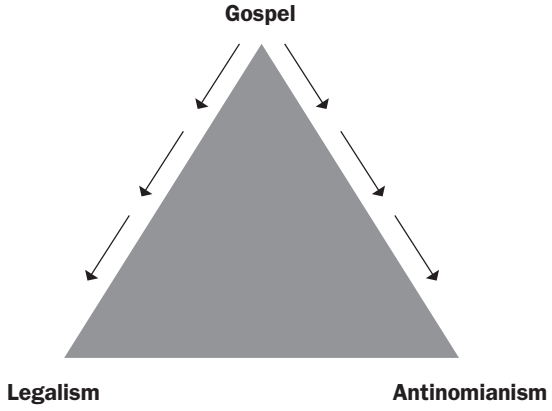
2. Jesus saves us not by *our* efforts but by what he has done in his life, death, and resurrection.

3. Now, as we follow Christ, we lead lives in which we begin to see the effects of sin healed in ourselves and the world around us.

THE GOSPEL OF GRACE VS LEGALISM AND ANTINOMIANISM

As mentioned before, studying the gospel is not a one-time affair. Over time, we must continue to examine its intricacies so as not to lose our grasp on what the bad news, good news, and great news is.

There are two major ways we can lose our understanding of the gospel. For a moment, think of a mountain with a tip at the top and two slopes for sides. At the top of the mountain is the gospel, and there are two opposite errors at the bottom of the mountain—legalism and antinomianism.



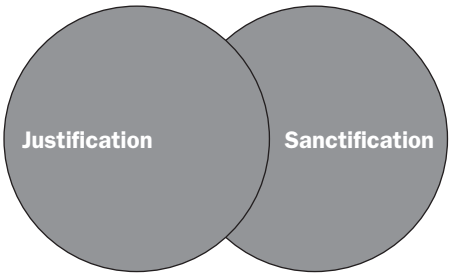
Legalism says, "I obey. Therefore, God accepts me." Antinomianism says, "I'm accepted by God. Therefore, I don't really have to obey." But the gospel says, "I'm accepted by God. Therefore, I obey with joy in every fiber of my being." We are justified by faith alone—not by our good works—but faith always *leads* to good works.

If we slide down either side of the mountain, then we don't fully understand what being a Christian is all about. But most people in the church don't live down at the bottom of the mountain. Instead, we live a little down the slope on either side.

When our minds and mouths describe the gospel, they may rightly say, "I'm saved by grace, not by my works. And that grace will lead me to a holy life." But, deep down, our hearts operate a little differently. Our hearts may subconsciously believe that God loves us because we've worked hard. Or our hearts will secretly compromise, choosing not to live a holy life because God is a God of grace and will accept us anyway. The further from the top we are, the less the Holy Spirit operates in our lives—even if we are a Christian who believes the gospel. Each tiny click down the mountain results in less joy, power for change, and spiritual reality in us. Conversely, the closer to the top we get, the more the Holy Spirit's power operates in us and through us. It is only if we continually push ourselves toward the top that we grow.

It is typical for evangelical preachers to speak as if there are two ways to react to God—to follow him and do his will or to reject him and follow our own way. Of course, both of those responses exist. But as we have seen, there is a way to reject God as *savior*—to try to be your own savior—even while you are obeying his law. People who turn the gospel into legalism look to the approval of others (or themselves) to see if they have done God's will. It is not enough to simply preach as if there are two ways to react to God. There are three: religion, non-religion, and the gospel.

Ministry leaders must distinguish the gospel from both religion and non-religion, both legalism and antinomianism. If someone preaches mainly against legalistic attitudes toward keeping God's law, people will think they are espousing antinomianism—that there's no need to bother trying to keep the law at all. If someone mainly preaches against leading an immoral life and the need to follow God's law, people will think they are promoting legalism—that we must follow God's law to have any sense of salvation. That's how counterintuitive the gospel is: if you only contrast it with one of these errors, people will think that means it is the *other* error. The power of the gospel is lost, and its genius obscured, unless we clarify how it is distinct from both misunderstandings.

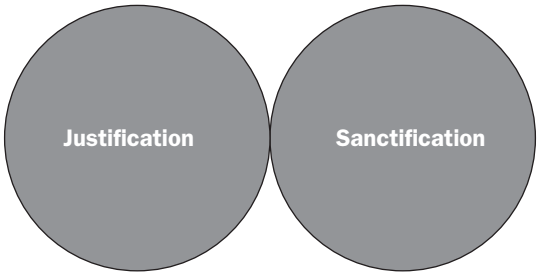


Legalism: Justification and Sanctification Merged

"God accepts me because I am forgiven but also because I work hard to live like Jesus."

Antinomianism: Justification and Sanctification Separated

"We are saved by grace; God loves us no matter what. Change is optional—we're just broken."



The Gospel: Justification is by Faith Alone but Always Leads to Change

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"We are not saved because we change, but salvation always changes us."

GRACE AND THE LAW

The law of God is the revealed will of God. It is not only instruction for our behavior but also for our words, thoughts, motives, and loves of our heart. It is the revelation of God's own character and nature—what he hates and what he loves.

The law of the Lord is also written on every conscience. When speaking of the Gentiles, Romans 2:15 tells us that "the requirements of the law are written on their hearts, their consciences also bearing witness." Therefore, all people know at least some of God's law intuitively (take, for example, the nearly universal "golden rule" to treat others as you would like to be treated). And whether they know it or not, they relate to this law as it was originally given to humankind, as an obligation to perfectly obey our Creator and Sustainer, and as a means or system of salvation. In some people (such as perfectionists) this deep knowledge of God's law lives quite consciously. We never feel like we are living up to what we should be. This knowledge of God's law then shows itself

in the universal human impulse to save ourselves—to gain self-esteem, get into heaven, command social status and respect, and so forth—through our own efforts and works.

There are three possible relationships to the law of God. Legalists take on the law as a joyless burden, a way to put God in their debt and essentially force him to bless them. Antinomians cast the law off, sometimes with intellectual arguments and often just as a declaration of personal freedom.[5] But the third way is this: when we are united with Christ by saving faith, the law remains obligatory as a revelation of the will, heart, and character of our Creator—a way to honor him—and a revelation of the kind of life we were created to live—a way to honor the design of our being. However, in the hand of our Savior, the law is no longer a system of salvation but a welcome rule of life. Anyone who has grasped *both* the freeness of our salvation *and* the costliness of it to God wants to know how to honor, please, and resemble the One who did all this for us. The law then becomes both a definition of and way to love God and our neighbor, and a way to increasingly resemble the image of Christ and become our true selves.

Again, there are no other possible relationships to the law of God. Either deep down we know we should be perfect and good, so we live with a conscious or unconscious sense of guilt and shame—resulting in either the legalist or the antinomian responses—or we know that Christ has fulfilled the law and now it is a way to express joyful gratitude through love.

Consider these two different operating principles: obeying *to get things from God* (using the law selfishly), or obeying *to get more of God himself* (following the gospel). Which of these effects do we experience: letting the notion of obeying the law aggravate our inner sin and drive us deeper into idols, or letting the law's instruction graciously kill our inner sin and idolatry?

GRACE AND THE "INDIVIDUALISTIC GOSPEL"

One of the significant, ongoing debates about the gospel relates to its supposed individualism. Some charge that the contemporary gospel presentation is only about getting one's individual sins forgiven and going to heaven when we die. The criticisms are that this is "antinomian"—it does not include the call for Christians to change their lives and behavior, and that this is "individualistic" and "otherworldly"—it says nothing about God's plan to renew this world and bring it justice. There is a lot of truth to these charges. And yet there are also problems with some current efforts to present a non-individualistic gospel. In short, they mute or even omit the theme of grace.

Here are two examples of new gospel presentations. One author trying to overcome the critique of antinomianism presents the gospel like this:

[5] Sinclair Ferguson persuasively argues that, at the root, these two seemingly different attitudes toward God's law—the legalist's and the antinomian's—are the same. On the surface they appear opposites, one taking the law with extreme seriousness and the other laughing at it and discarding it altogether. But, Sinclair argues, they both assume that the law of God is not a *joy* but rather a burden imposed on us by an unloving God who does not seek our blessing or happiness but only his own honor. The legalist accepts that burden with the attitude, "Obedience is a grind, but I will do it to make God bless me," and the antinomian refuses that burden. But both see God as a being who, at heart, does not love us or seek our joy. Legalists and antinomians are, therefore, "evil, non-identical twins from the same womb." See Sinclair B. Ferguson, *The Whole Christ: Legalism, Antinomianism, and Gospel Assurance—Why the Marrow Controversy Still Matters* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2016).

> The good news that Jesus announced is that we can live our lives with God—the best kind of life that is humanly possible. Jesus' message is, simply, "Turn around and step into a life with God, the kind of life I lived and invite you to live with me." When we accept Jesus' invitation, believe that what he is saying is true, and follow him with our whole life, we experience freedom from past sins and future fears, along with contentment, joy, love, and power today.[6]

This presentation implies strongly that we must change our lives—"follow him with our whole life"—in order to experience "freedom … contentment, joy, love, and power." This formulation will lead people to believe that the reformation of one's life is required before they receive salvation.

Another presentation, one trying to overcome the critique of individualism, presents the gospel like this:

1. The world and all that's in it was designed by God for good. We were meant for intimacy with God and other human beings and the created world.

2. We—and the world—were damaged by evil. We put ourselves in the place of God and ruin our world and ourselves.

3. Jesus came to restore the world and everything in it to what God intended. Jesus came to be like us, to die on the cross, and to rise from the dead. In this, Jesus identifies with us, owns our judgment we deserve for damaging the world, and releases his power to restore the world.

4. Jesus invites us to join him and his community to heal the world. To do that we must: (a) Believe that his death and resurrection broke the corruption in the world and in our hearts. (b) Own our responsibility for damaging this world. (c) Choose to follow him. If we do, Jesus will give us himself, the Holy Spirit, and his people with whom we can follow him.[7]

This presentation seeks to ground the gospel presentation in the narrative arc of the Bible, in Creation, Fall, Redemption, and Restoration. It does that, but it mutes the legal and forensic aspects of sin—it puts the emphasis on how sin damages and hurts us rather than how it alienates us from God and creates a barrier between us. Therefore, it mutes the radical good news of God's free grace and Jesus' substitutionary work.

This presentation gestures toward grace in the rather cryptic statement that Jesus "owns our judgment we deserve"—but there is nothing said earlier about the nature of sin as self-salvation.

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[6] Dieter Zander, "Abandoning an Incomplete Gospel," *Christianity Today*, September 17, 2007, https://www.christianitytoday.com/pastors/2007/september-online-only/070917a.html.

[7] Based on InterVarsity Christian Fellowship, "Big Story" gospel presentation, https://evangelism.intervarsity.org/resource/share-big-story (accessed April 6, 2023).

Sin is seen mainly as something that hurts us, not God. Jesus' death "breaks the corruption in our hearts" but doesn't reconcile us with the Lord. The ending implies that the reason we want to believe and repent is not so that we can be reconciled with God but so that we can work with him in his project to renew the world. This formulation can easily lead people to believe that an inward change of heart and enlistment in God's program is how we receive salvation.

Both presentations distort the nature of saving faith. In legalistic fashion, they equate changing one's life and being "salt and light" in the world with what it means to receive salvation. The bad news of the gospel is muted: we are not just unhappy (as the first presentation above says) or damaged (as the second says) but eternally lost and incapable of contributing anything to our salvation. The good news of the gospel is also muted. This is the true message: by transferring our trust from ourselves and the world to Christ and his work, we are, in him, immediately loved and accepted unconditionally forever. We are as loved on the first day of our Christian life as we will be a billion years from now. This electrifying message of free grace and justification is lost in the effort to avoid individualism.

We must also be very careful not to mute the concept of grace when we point to the importance of justice. After all, doing justice is the *result* of experiencing grace. If we try to insert justice into our explanation of the gospel in such a way that obscures the grace and free justification that the gospel brings, it undermines the motivation for truly pursuing justice.

USING BOTH WAYS TO PRESENT THE GOSPEL

When I share the "Creation, Fall, Redemption, Restoration" gospel presentation with people, I find that it does not tend to result in them feeling much conviction of their sin. It stresses how "we" as a human race have ruined the world and damaged ourselves—and a lot of non-believers, especially those with a liberal point of view, feel not convicted but confirmed. This gospel presentation does not focus on the individual, but it does press the person's particular sins, idolatries, and ways they are now alienated from God. But the more traditional "God, Sin, Christ, Faith" gospel presentation can leave out both the ethical implications and the corporate implications of following Christ.

Is there any way to incorporate the two into one presentation? My response is yes. And it can be done by starting from either side.

If we use the "God, Sin, Christ, Faith" approach, justice and injustice can be brought in as part of the bad news, since injustice is one of the effects of sin. Justice can be also brought in as part of the good news to show that God is so committed to justice that he could not merely forgive us without the debt to justice being paid. Finally, doing justice can especially be part of the great news—that through the life and death of Jesus, the world will be renewed and justice ushered in.

If we use the "Creation, Fall, Redemption, Restoration" approach, we can bring in the legal aspects of sin (the "wages of sin" as a debt that must be paid) and Christ's substitutionary work to

resolve them in the "Fall" and "Redemption" categories. Of course, the effects of sin on all relationships will still be detailed, and so it is important to emphasize personal responsibility in the Fall and Redemption as well.

In my book *Center Church*, I give an example of a gospel presentation that combines the two basic methods.[8] However, I urge us to recognize that each of the two ways to outline the gospel has their attendant limitations and strengths.

A BRIDGE TO THE KINGDOM OF GOD

Too often, the historic Protestant "gospel of grace"—which emphasizes free justification, substitutionary atonement, and imputed righteousness—is pitted against the "gospel of the kingdom," which supposedly emphasizes justice and community. But there is no true tension here, let alone any contradiction. As we will see in the next paper, the kingdom of God is about justice and community *only* because it is about grace. We enter the kingdom of God not through works but because it is a gift (Luke 12:32). It is entered only through the new birth (John 3:1–5) and faith in Christ for the forgiveness of our sins (Colossians 1:13–14). It is prepared for us only through Christ's weakness and sacrificial love rather than through strength and power.

Legalistic religion is delivered by the strong to the strong. Had Jesus come in strength to save those strong enough to live up to his moral standards, he could have only saved a particular group of people from political and social oppression for a time. Salvation in that instance would have only been for the moral who had their lives in order. But because he came in weakness to die in our place, Jesus saves us from sin and death itself—and all by grace.

To access this salvation, we must begin as Christ did—with the weakness of repentance and an absolutely dependent faith, denying that we have anything at all to contribute to our salvation. Then, just as Jesus' death led to resurrection, our dying to self-effort and self-centeredness leads to spiritual resurrection and new life. Then we grow into Christlikeness throughout the rest of our lives by experiencing this same basic pattern again—we grow into true strength, true riches, and true happiness through weakness and service. Our lives are no longer based on insecurity, power, and self-interest, but on confidence in God, love, and self-sacrifice. The way up is down: the way to true riches is to give away, the way to lasting happiness is to seek the happiness of others, and the way to genuine influence is to give up power or use it only in service. And it is *only* a body of people living according to this pattern that can bring justice, harmony, and peace into this present world.

[8] Timothy Keller, *Center Church: Doing Balanced, Gospel-Centered Ministry in Your City* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2012), 32–37.

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PART TWO

Kingdom

When people think about the concept of salvation, many focus on its aspects of individual forgiveness and personal change. But God's plans for the world extend beyond our inner selves. They involve the coming of his kingdom. Over the last few decades, the evangelical world has rediscovered the importance of the biblical idea that God's kingdom will draw close. But what does it *mean* for the kingdom to draw close—and what is its relation to the gospel?

THE NATURE OF THE KINGDOM

Mark 1:15 shows us that, at the very least, God's kingdom is closely tied to his gospel. In this verse, Mark summarizes Jesus' message with the words, "The kingdom of God has come near. Repent and believe the good news!" What exactly is this kingdom?

First of all, the kingdom is a prediction. In its conception, the world was created as a place of complete flourishing and harmony under God's rule. Sin—more specifically, rebellion against God's authority—led to the unraveling of this creation. Relationships with God, other people, races, classes, and individuals, and physical nature itself disintegrate whenever God is not acknowledged as King (see Genesis 3:7–24). By that logic, whenever God's rule is finally restored, it will bring about the complete healing of creation and all the damaging results of sin. It will not only result in our reconciliation with God as individuals but will also result in a world of justice, the reunification of all humanity, and the end of physical decay and death itself. The kingdom of God deals with *all* of reality—spiritual and material, individual and social.

New Testament scholarship tells us that the Greek word that the Bible uses for "kingdom," *basileia*, does not mean a realm or territory. Thinking of the kingdom as a territory can lead to a warlike mentality. For example, someone seeking to expand the territory of God may fight on a cultural front and aim to take over the media for Jesus. The kingdom refers not to a realm but to a *reign*, not to a territory but to an administration, a pattern, an order of life. Above all, it means the presence of the King himself, who reigns and reorders disordered hearts, relationships, and communities. To enter the kingdom, to witness and be a sign of the kingdom, or to spread the influence of the kingdom is to see Christ's healing, kingly power permeate lives.

The kingdom of God, then, is the renewal of all creation through the reentry of God's ruling power brought about by Christ's death and resurrection. Even though Jesus' words that "the kingdom of God is near" were true because he, the King, was present, the kingdom was not yet set up, so to speak. That happened when he died and rose again, and a new creation of the future became

present through the coming of the Spirit. Now hearts, relationships, communities, and practices are healed and rewoven with one another to the degree that they come under the authority of Jesus, through his presence in both Word and Spirit (Psalm 72; Colossians 1:16–20; Ephesians 1:9–10). This healing is only partially realized now, but it will become complete on the last day when the kingdom of God is here in full and every result of sin is eradicated.

How do we enter the kingdom? We are transferred from the kingdom of darkness into the kingdom of God's Son when we receive Christ's redemption and forgiveness (Colossians 1:13–14). Put another way, we enter the kingdom through the new birth (John 3:3–5). Once we enter it through faith in the gospel, the kingdom renovates our hearts, bringing righteousness, peace, and joy (Romans 14:17).

Jesus' kingdom came as a surprise. It was not the kind of kingdom the religious leaders of his time hoped for, and it was certainly not one the world sought. The kingdom of God has since remained present in the world's history because Christ is the true King. However, it still holds surprises for us.

One surprise is its nature as an already-but-not-yet kingdom. This King comes not once to bring the kingdom but twice. It was brought only partially the first time he was here, and it will be brought fully at his second coming. The Bible supports this by stating the kingdom has arrived (Luke 17:20–21; Matthew 12:28), yet not fully (Matthew 6:10, 25:34). Like a seed, it is hidden but will grow into fullness (Matthew 13:31–42). It is already here in a sense but not yet here in another.

Another surprise about the kingdom's nature is that it is an upside-down kingdom. This King initially comes in a way that reverses the values of the world—he comes in weakness and service to die as a ransom for us, not in strength and with force. The kingdom spreads in this world, not through domination, but through sacrifice and service. This was shocking to the people of Jesus' time, and it still dumbfounds the world's wisdom in every culture and century. We enter this kingdom through the upside-down pattern of the King who went to the cross to offer us sheer grace and repentance. We will never be able to enter based on our own ability or merit. Now, we live in this kingdom by following the example of our King's sacrifice and service.

LIVING AS PART OF THE KINGDOM

Living as a citizen of God's kingdom brings these things into our lives:

- **Grace and freedom:** In our personal lives, the alternative to being part of Christ's kingdom is being enslaved to personal ideals. If our happiness is dependent on anything other than Christ (for example, a successful career or a happy family), that thing becomes a master to us because we treat it as a savior. When we make Jesus our Savior and Lord, however, his kingdom liberates us from the power of false masters (in the case of the earlier examples, from unhealthy overworking or excessive anxiety over our children's wellbeing).
- **Peace and justice:** In our relationships, the alternative to being part of Christ's kingdom is being enslaved to social idols. Our world's system attaches high value to the notions of power, comfort, success, and recognition. But those in God's kingdom succeed through

the cross, not through strength and accomplishment. The kingdom is entered not by the strong, but by those who admit their weakness and need for grace. This completely changes our attitude toward the poor, the powerless, and the marginalized. We no longer have to ignore or exploit others to ensure our own success. Working toward the peace and justice of God is a sign that we are citizens of the kingdom.

- **Work and witness:** In our vocation, the alternative to being part of Christ's kingdom is being controlled by cultural idols—ideologies. Every field of human endeavor puts forth something other than God as its ultimate value and goal, whether that be financial profit, individual rights or happiness, human reason, the power of a certain group, or some other aim. When we instill the kingdom's values in our work, it will be distinctive from work carried out under the power of ideologies.
- **Salt and light:** Jesus' miracles were called "signs of the kingdom." When John the Baptist asked if he really was Christ the King, Jesus pointed to the signs of his ministry: "The blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is proclaimed to the poor" (Matthew 11:4–5). Jesus did these things miraculously. Scottish philosopher David Hume defined a miracle as a "violation of the laws of nature."[1] That may be true in a sense, but it would be truer to say that Jesus' miracles were *restorations* of the natural order. God did not originally design us to be sick, diseased, hungry, poor, and excluded. Jesus used his miraculous power to give people a foretaste of the salvation that was coming, the restoration of all creation by the ruling power of God. We may not always have miraculous power, but our good deeds toward those around us must be regarded as foretastes of the restoration of all creation. We are, as Jesus says in the Sermon on the Mount, to be "the salt of the earth" (Matthew 5:13) that preserves those around us, and "the light of the world" (Matthew 5:14) that helps them toward a life of salvation in Christ.

THE KINGDOM AND THE GOSPEL OF GRACE

In many ways, the gospel of grace and the good news of the kingdom are two biblical ways of speaking about the same thing. In Ephesians 1:21, Paul says that because Christ rose and ascended, he now rules "not only in the present age but also in the one to come," a classic text about the already-but-not-yet overlap of the ages. In the next chapter, he states:

> And God raised us up with Christ and seated us with him in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus, in order that in the coming ages he might show the incomparable riches of his grace, expressed in his kindness to us in Christ Jesus. For it is by grace you have

[1] David Hume, *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding* (originally published 1777), available at https://www.gutenberg.org/files/9662/9662-h/9662-h.htm.

been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast.

EPHESIANS 2:6–9

It is because of the presence of the future kingdom of God that we can already be, in a sense, resurrected and ascended. But see how Paul seamlessly moves from kingdom theology to making the claim that we are saved by grace, not works. Using the past tense, saying we are already raised and ascended to heaven, Paul teaches that we are now so united by faith that God sees us "in Christ Jesus" and therefore sees us as if we were already perfect and glorified in heaven.

The biblical teaching that we are "saved by faith alone but not by faith that remains alone"[2] gives us insight into how to live as a citizen of the kingdom, preventing us from both legalism and antinomianism. In Matthew 6:33, Jesus tells us to "seek first his kingdom and his righteousness." And when we do seek the kingdom, we discover that it is a gift of grace. The kingdom of God comes to us, not because we have earned it but because it gives God pleasure to give it to us. Consider Luke 12:32: "Do not be afraid, little flock, for your Father has been pleased to give you the kingdom." To say that salvation is by Christ's work and not ours is the same as saying that Christ is Author and Lord, not just of our lives but of our salvation. This reading of the kingdom saves us from falling into legalism.

On the other hand, the very idea of a kingdom implies that its citizens must order their lives in conformity to the King's will. The ways of the kingdom are "so that in everything he might have the supremacy," as Colossians 1:18 tells us. There is no area of our human lives that Jesus has not created, and so Jesus' will must have the preeminence in each area of life. To "seek first his kingdom and his righteousness" means to live according to Jesus' will in every area of life as expressed (in part) in the same passage's Sermon on the Mount.

The Sermon on the Mount is, as many have said, a picture of the church as a new humanity, a countercultural kingdom community, a way to see what human life under the Lordship of Christ looks like. The power of Christ's kingdom, therefore, is deeply transformative. Anyone who says they have received Christ and his forgiveness but has not experienced a holier life is not really in the kingdom. The solution is not just to try harder to be holy, but to ask if we really understand the gospel of sheer grace which puts us in the kingdom. If we truly understand it, a desire to lead a holier life will be stirred within us—we will want to follow the kingdom's ways. This reading of the kingdom saves us from falling into antinomianism.

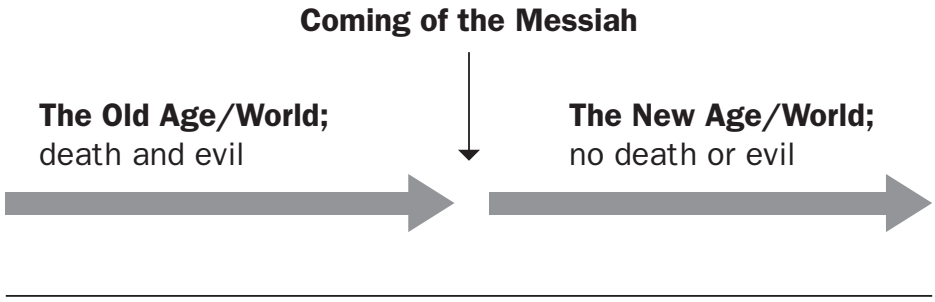
THE KINGDOM AND ESCHATOLOGY

Many biblical scholars have pointed out that the phrase "kingdom of God," while heavily used by the synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark, and Luke), is virtually absent in the Gospel and writings

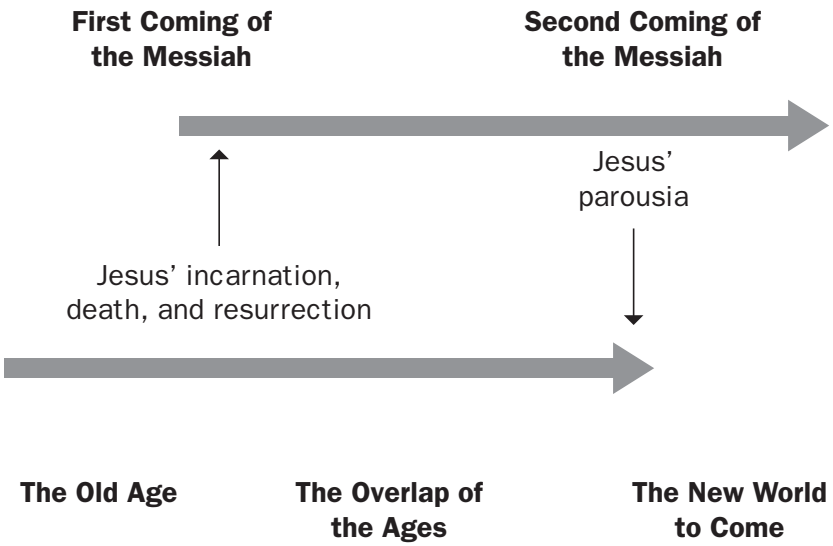
[2] A classic way to express the Reformation doctrine that true faith saves apart from good works but always inevitably leads to good works.

of John, the Pauline corpus, and most of the remaining New Testament. This has led some to argue that the kingdom of God is not a foundational biblical concept. However, there is important scholarship, especially that of Geerhardus Vos and Herman Ridderbos, which argues what John means by "eternal life" and what Paul means by the term *aeon* ("age") is the same as what the synoptic writers mean when they mention the kingdom. Paul also uses *kyrios* ("Lord") to describe Jesus over two hundred times, and the Lordship of Christ is always informed by the concept of the kingdom (see Colossians 1:15–20).

In his book *The Pauline Eschatology*, Vos devised the following two charts that express two contrasting eschatological views throughout the Bible. The original thinking in the Old Testament understood that the Messiah would come once and banish the old age, the kingdom of darkness and man, and set up the kingdom and city of God.



The second view, understood in the light of the first coming of Christ, is that we live now in the "overlap of the ages," to use Paul's term, or in the already-but-not-yet kingdom of the synoptics' terminology.



Between the first and second coming of Christ, the kingdom of darkness and the kingdom of God coexist.[3] The first is based on power, exploitation, and self-glorification (Genesis 11:4), while the second is based on love, service, and God's glorification. Nevertheless, the days of the city of man are numbered. The future belongs to the kingdom of God, and this means a renewed material universe (as seen in Isaiah 65:17; Romans 8:19–21; Revelation 21:1). While people can only enter the kingdom through faith in Christ and its ensuing rebirth, the eventual, inevitable eschatological goal of the kingdom is the renewal of all of reality. Christians with a kingdom mindset should therefore be concerned about the common good—not only the building up of the church but bringing about justice, integrating faith and work, and restoring the broken aspects of our society. As the theologian Edmund Clowney writes:

> The renewal of Christ's salvation ultimately includes a renewed universe ... Christ's miracles were miracles of the kingdom, performed as signs of what the kingdom means.... His blessing was pronounced upon the poor, the afflicted, the burdened and heavy-laden who came to Him and believed in Him. ... The pattern of the kingdom that was revealed through those signs must continue in the church. ... Kingdom evangelism is therefore holistic as it transmits by word and deed the promise of Christ for body and soul as well as the demand of Christ for body and soul.[4]

THE KINGDOM AND THE COVENANT

Although some translations of the Old Testament use the phrase "kingdom of God" (Exodus 19:6; 1 Chronicles 28:5, 29:10–12; and 2 Chronicles 13:8), a far more dominant metaphor to describe God's relationship with his people and his expectations for their conduct is that of "covenant," a word used nearly three hundred times in the Hebrew Scriptures. Technically, a covenant is any binding agreement entered into by two parties to form a relationship. But covenants with God are always covenants between servants and a Lord. To be in covenant with God is to be in a relationship acknowledging him as sovereign Ruler.

We do not have enough pages to take a deep look at the rich biblical theme of covenant here, but we should mention that the idea of covenant enriches our understanding of the kingdom in many ways. Parties in a covenant bind themselves to each other and give themselves to the other freely and with open hearts. The biblical covenants outline the conditions under which God and his people have a relationship. They are about God's rule and human response. In all cases, God initiates freely and blesses disproportionately. According to the Mosaic covenant, obedience to the law would be a sign to the neighbors that God's reign among Israel was truly unique—God

[3] For more information on these topics, see Augustine's *City of God* and its examination of the city of God and the city of man.

[4] Edmund P. Clowney, "Kingdom Evangelism" in *The Pastor-Evangelist: Preacher, Model, and Mobilizer for Church Growth*, R. Greenway, ed. (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 1989), 22.

dwelled among his people closely, clearly articulated his will, and blessed his people with wisdom and justice (Deuteronomy 4:5–8). The end of Deuteronomy sets before Israel two options: live according to God's will and flourish or follow idols and perish. The covenant is the root, and the kingdom is the plant that grows from it.

Again, we see that the kingdom of God is at the heart of things. It is not so much a separate concept from the gospel but rather another way of speaking about the covenant, eternal life, and the Lordship of Christ. Each of these terms, images, and metaphors give us unique and crucial insight about the salvation that Christ brings.

THE KINGDOM AND THE RESURRECTION

To say Christ's resurrection plays an important role in the establishment of God's kingdom would be an understatement. His resurrection is far from just a stupendous magic trick. It is an invasion of good. Because of his sacrifice on the cross, Jesus' resurrection completely reshapes the Christian life. It brings the new creation of the future into the present and the heavenly glory down to earth. It brings the omnipotent power with which God renews and heals the entire world. Although this power is only partially revealed now, it is still actual and substantial. The power with which God raised Jesus from the dead and with which he will liberate the entire world from decay and death is in us now (Romans 8:21–23). Ephesians 1:19–20 tells us that God's "incomparably great power for us who believe … is the same as the mighty strength he exerted when he raised Christ from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly realms." The risen Christ and the Holy Spirit he sends are the "firstfruits" (Romans 8:23; 1 Corinthians 15:20–23), a first installment, a down payment guarantee of a future triumph over death, and a new, remade material world.

The resurrection brings the heavenly presence of God to earth. When Christ died, the temple veil that separated humanity from the holy presence of God—the presence and power that had once made the earth a paradise—was ripped from top to bottom. Author Enoch Wang has helpfully compiled a list of written works that show how the idea that the heavenly, royal presence of God is now present, accessible, and available on earth is biblically pervasive.[5]

[5] See Michael Morales, *Who Shall Ascend the Mountain of the Lord? A Biblical Theology of the Book of Leviticus* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2015); Geerhardus Vos, *The Teaching of the Epistle to the Hebrews* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1956); Meredith G. Kline, *God, Heaven and Har Magedon: A Covenantal Tale of Cosmos and Telos* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2006), *Images of the Spirit* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 1999), *Kingdom Prologue* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2006); Gregory Beale, *The Temple and the Church's Mission: A Biblical Theology of the Dwelling Place of God* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2004); Richard B. Gaffin Jr., *By Faith, Not by Sight: Paul and the Order of Salvation* and *Resurrection and Redemption: A Study in Paul's Soteriology* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2013). Wang writes: "Eschatology is first vertical before it becomes horizontal. It is always about His kingdom come—humanity ascends to heaven (sanctification, transformation) and heaven descends to earth (conformation). In light of this comprehensive eschatology that 'creates' human history and redemptive history, the gospel becomes much clearer and beautiful, and sin becomes uglier. The bad news becomes worse news in comparison to what God intended for humanity; the good news becomes better news, since a human being (new humanity) has bodily ascended to the heavenly realm (realized the eschatology); and the great news becomes greater news because the Spirit has been sent down by the second Adam and the New Testament church is in the Spirit and heaven. This can also help to deal with materialism, secularism, the dichotomy of spirit and body, the gospel and the law, the faith and the obedience."

The cross and the resurrection together—and only together—constitute the basic operating principle by which Christians are to live in light of the new creation as directed in Romans 13:11–13, Galatians 6:15, and 1 Corinthians 6:1–2. Living this way changes everything: how we conduct relationships, our attitudes toward wealth and power, how we work in our vocations, and our understanding and practice of both sexuality and justice.

The cross and resurrection embody what is known as "The Great Reversal." Christ saves us through weakness. He gave up power and privilege to suffer what seemed to be a great defeat. But he triumphed, not despite the weakness and defeat but *through* it and *because of* it. The Great Reversal becomes "a dynamic" which "opens out onto a rhythm of life, an ethic, and a way of looking at and living in the world" and every aspect of life.[6] By living out the self-sacrificial principles laid out in Jesus' death and resurrection, we renew human life here—only partially but still substantially. When we die to our own comfort, power, and status in order to give our money, time, and love in selfless ways, we bring new life to a world that needs it.

THE ALREADY-BUT-NOT-YET KINGDOM

Jesus taught that in him the kingdom of God has arrived (Luke 17:20–21), and we enter it now through conversion (Matthew 18:3). He claimed that he brings the new covenant and the Spirit that changes hearts (compare John 6:45 with Jeremiah 31:34 and Isaiah 54:13); that he defeats the great enemies of the people (Matthew 12:28); that he brings the Gentiles into the church body (Luke 4:24–28); that to believe in him delivers us from death (John 11:25–26); that the exodus by which God will liberate the whole creation from slavery to death and decay is through him (Luke 9:31); and that the new temple prophesied was established at his resurrection (John 2:19–21). Jesus claimed in the greatest detail that every feature of the reign of God—prophesied in Scripture to be established at the end of history—had been fulfilled by him.

And yet, Jesus is just as clear in his teaching that the kingdom of God has *not* come in all its fullness. He taught his disciples to ask God in prayer for the kingdom to come (Matthew 6:10). He told them that "the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world" would not be given until Judgment Day (Matthew 25:34). Jesus' parables of the kingdom stress the incompleteness of the kingdom of God. Because it is still in the future, the kingdom of God is like a seed that grows largely out of sight, invisible to human eyes, and yet will eventually grow into the greatest of trees (Matthew 13:31–33).

The kingdom of God is already here but not yet here at the same time. The kingdom of God is present wherever the Holy Spirit is present in power. Where God exerts his rule through his Word and Spirit, the effects of sin begin to heal. We must not underestimate how present with us the kingdom of God is. The kingdom is like a great banquet (Matthew 22:2) and a state of "blessedness" (Matthew 5:3, 10). But we must also not overestimate how realized it is, how much it exists only in the future. Because the kingdom is present *partially* but not fully, we must expect substantial but not total healing in all areas of life.

[6] Christopher Watkin, *Michel Foucault* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2018), 81.

The implications of this are significant for every area of life. We can overstress the "already" of the kingdom to the exclusion of the "not yet." We can expect quick solutions to problems. We can fail to expect any suffering or tragedy to come. We can underestimate the power of remaining sin in our hearts. But we can likewise overstress the "not yet" of the kingdom to the exclusion of the "already." We can be too pessimistic about personal change. We can withdraw from engaging with the world, too afraid of being "polluted" by it.

The theologian John Stott suggests more applications that the already-but-not-yet kingdom can have in our lives:

- **Knowledge of truth:** God has spoken. In a time in which many insist no one can know any truth for certain, our King has given us his Word. But on the other hand, we must be humble about our ability to understand the Word perfectly. In secondary areas where Christians cannot agree, we should be less triumphalist. The "not yet" means more charity in nonessentials and more humble tolerance in areas of disagreement.
- **Personal change and growth:** The Holy Spirit has come to us already, subduing our fallen nature and selfishness. Through the presence of the kingdom, we are made "partakers of the divine nature" (2 Peter 1:4 ESV). What an incredible truth! The "already" gives us more confidence that anyone can be changed, that any enslaving habit can be overcome. But on the other hand, our fallen nature remains in us and will never be eliminated until the kingdom arrives in full. We must avoid shallow answers, and we must not expect quick fixes. The "not yet" means more patience and understanding with those growing in the faith, being neither condescending nor impatient with lapses and failures.
- **Church change and growth:** The church is the community of kingdom power. The "already" means we can be confident God can bring revival and transformation to our communities through the local church. But the "not yet" means that error and evil will not be completely eradicated from the church until the kingdom is here in full. We must not be harshly critical of imperfect congregations, nor jump from church to church over perceived blemishes.
- **Social change:** Even now, Christ is ruling over history (Ephesians 1:22). Through common grace, he gives the world the institutions of family and government to restrain evil, and he gives strong consciences and gifts of art, leadership, and science to enrich the world. Alongside trouble and pain, God has given improved healthcare and medical advances, growing defense of human rights, the abolition of slavery, many protections for working people, and so on. The "already" means that Christians can expect God's power to change social conditions and communities. But on the other hand, the kingdom is not yet here in its fullness. There will be, as Matthew 24:6 phrases it, "wars and rumors of wars." Selfishness, cruelty, terrorism, and oppression will continue. Christians harbor no illusions about politics, nor expect utopian conditions. The "not yet" means that Christians will not trust any political or social agenda to bring about righteousness here on earth. In general, those who believe that the kingdom is *only* "not yet" will

be extremely pessimistic and negative about change in people, the church, and society. Those who believe that the kingdom is *already* here will be overly optimistic and naïve about the possibility of revival, change, and transformation.[7]

THE UPSIDE-DOWN KINGDOM

The first time our Messiah came, he achieved victory through weakness. That is why God's kingdom is, from the world's point of view, the upside-down kingdom. This King came in a way that reversed the values of the world. He came in weakness and service, not strength and force, to die as a ransom for us. There are three massive implications of this fact.

First, it means that we enter the kingdom through this same upside-down pattern. Unlike other religions, we do not achieve salvation by summoning up our strength to live a virtuous life. We receive salvation through the weakness of repentance.

Second, it means that we live, grow, and serve in this kingdom, not by taking power but by following Jesus' example and giving up power and privilege in order to forgive, sacrifice, and serve.

Third, we see the whole world differently. We do not overly valorize the talented, competent, and able. We do not bow and cater to the wealthy and brilliant (James 2:1–7). Rather, we lift up those at the margins.

The good things of this world—beauty, power, comfort, and recognition—are seen as blessings. But when we receive them without the guidance of God, they become curses. They will consume us and drive us to the edge. Though we may be attractive or wealthy now, we can easily let a fear of becoming ugly or poor define our actions. Soon enough, our whole life may revolve around trying to cling to something fleeting that will not truly save us. And so, the worst and most just thing God can do to those who reject him is to give them up to what they want (Romans 1:21–25).

The hard things of this world—weakness, deprivation, loss, and rejection—are seen as curses. But when we receive them with faith in God, even they will be turned into blessings (2 Corinthians 4:16–17, 12:10). Every person is living within one of these matrices. Each one of us is experiencing blessings or curses (in many cases, both at the same time), and the upside-down nature of the kingdom can help us order them within our lives, so they do not control us or destroy us.

In God's economy, the high will be brought low and the low brought high. As Hannah sings in 1 Samuel 2:4, "The bows of the warriors are broken, but those who stumbled are armed with strength." Those who seek to ascend to power will find they are only descending; those who descend in humility will find they have ascended, "for everyone who exalts himself will be humbled and he who humbles himself will be exalted" (Luke 14:11 ESV). There is no message more contrary to the way the world understands life, or more subversive to its values. In his book *The Moral Vision of the New Testament*, Richard B. Hays states it like this:

[7] John R.W. Stott, *Balanced Christianity* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2014).

> God's … invasion of the world has wrought an inversion: God has reversed the positions of insiders and outsiders. Those who are in positions of authority and privilege reject Jesus and the message. However, people of low or despised position in the social world of first-century Jewish culture receive the gospel gladly, for their need is great. The lepers, the demon-possessed, Gentile women (Mark 7:24–30), the Gentile centurion at the cross (Mark 15:39) [show] faithful response to Jesus. "Many who are the first will be the last, and the last will be first" (Mark 10:31).[8]

The Great Reversal is not just a challenge to the world's thought-categories. It is the most practical guide to real life we could ever have. The reversal patterns Christ showed us have been deeply embedded into the fabric of the world by its Creator and Redeemer since its inception. To be blind to them will make us arrogant like Job's friends, who were sure that anyone having a bad life must be a bad person. But this smug shallowness will be temporary because suffering in life is inevitable and, when it comes upon us, our naïve and simplistic worldview will collapse into despair, hardness, or profound cynicism. But if we see that God is the God of great reversals, we will be able to take heart and be of good courage. If we remember this, we can face anything. Paul understood that responding to troubles and hardships with faith and grace turned his weakness into strength. In 2 Corinthians 6:8–10, he describes himself—and all servants of God—as "genuine, yet regarded as impostors; known, yet regarded as unknown; dying, and yet we live on; beaten, and yet not killed; sorrowful, yet always rejoicing; poor, yet making many rich; having nothing, and yet possessing everything." Several chapters later, he recounts a specific incident that evidences this:

> In order to keep me from becoming conceited, I was given a thorn in my flesh, a messenger of Satan, to torment me. Three times I pleaded with the Lord to take it away from me. But he said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may rest on me. That is why, for Christ's sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong.
>
> 2 CORINTHIANS 12:7–10

This kingdom pattern of life—of life through death, power through service, happiness through sacrifice—is transformative when applied to every area of life. In the area of individual psychology, Christian identity is formed in a wholly different way, through receiving rather than achieving. In the area of relationships, we are moved from consumerism to covenant, from conflict to forgiveness and reconciliation. In social relationships, we are empowered to seek justice and identify with the marginalized.

[8] Richard B. Hays, *The Moral Vision of the New Testament: A Contemporary Introduction to New Testament Ethics* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 1996).

THE FIGHT OVER THE KINGDOM BANNER

Over the last generation, the church has recovered the foundational nature of the kingdom of God, something that was overlooked by many theologians in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. We know how important the concept is, but there is, unfortunately, a battle raging over which efforts the "banner" of the kingdom should fly over.

Some conceive the kingdom strictly in a spiritual, individualistic sense, and so they see "kingdom work" as almost purely evangelism and building up the church, as if the church and kingdom are the same thing.

Others conceive the kingdom almost strictly in terms of social justice and see virtually any movement toward greater equity in society as the work of God's kingdom.

Some conceive the kingdom in terms of Christian political power in society and so speak about capturing the high places of culture—the media, arts, government, and academy—for Christ by putting Christians into places of power and having them dominated by Christian values and beliefs.

The problem with the first view (pure evangelism and church building) is that we cannot biblically identify the kingdom of God strictly within the institutional church. The institutional church is filled with both "wheat and weeds" (Matthew 13:24–30). When individual Christians are out in the world being salt and light, pervading all of society, as the parable of the yeast implies (Matthew 13:33)—integrating their faith with their work, pursuing justice in society, and loving their neighbor—they are being agents of the kingdom of God.

The problem with the second view (pure social justice) is that it ignores the teaching that repentance, faith in Christ, and the new birth are requisites for entering the kingdom of God. As Geerhardus Vos writes, "the kingdom-idea is the clearest expression of the principle that … everything is subservient to the glory of God."[9] Many secular revolutions make various things—human reason, blood, race, soil, human freedom, the market, the state—into absolutes and semi-deities.

The problem with the third view (pure political power) is that the kingdom of God is an upside-down one of service rather than dominance, and its already-but-not-yet nature means that Christians are not to set up Christ's earthly political rule on earth now.

Vos also says that the kingdom of God is "the realm of righteousness and justice, the realm of God's saving grace, and the realm of blessing and joy."[10] Pure evangelism forgets the realm of "righteousness and justice," pure social justice forgets the realm of "God's saving grace," and pure political power forgets the "realm of blessing and joy." The biblical concept of the kingdom is far too rich and complex to be put in such boxes.[11]

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[9] Geerhardus Vos, *The Teaching of Jesus Concerning the Kingdom of God and the Church* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 1998), 102.

[10] Ibid., 162–163.

[11] This is why I recommend works on the kingdom below that are not easy reads. I suggest Vos' *The Teaching of Jesus Concerning the Kingdom of God and the Church* to give a good account of that richness and complexity. For example, when Jesus says in both Matthew and Luke that the poor are blessed and "theirs is the kingdom," is he talking about only the poor in spirit (Matthew) or the actual poor (Luke)? The right answer is yes. See Ridderbos' work on this.

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PART THREE

Personal Gospel Renewal

One of the most basic sayings around City to City is, "The gospel changes *everything*." That's a way to say that the gospel is not merely the way we receive salvation; it also alters every sphere of our lives, propels us through every stage of Christian growth, and resources us for every difficulty and challenge we will face. In particular, the gospel gives us new motives, reorders the loves of the heart (and therefore, all our relationships), and reframes our behavior—all in order to renew us into Christlikeness. The gospel alone has the power to do this. We call this process "personal gospel renewal."

WHAT IS PERSONAL GOSPEL RENEWAL?

The gospel gives Christians a clear call to change their lives after hearing its message. They are to grow in grace (1 Peter 2:2–3, 3:18), in spiritual maturity (Hebrews 6:1), in love, self-control, perseverance, peace, joy, humility, kindness, gentleness, goodness, faithfulness, and patience (2 Peter 1:5–8; Galatians 5:22–25). Through this, we will be increasingly transformed into the image of Christ (Ephesians 4:13–16). As Ephesians 4:24 instructs us, we are to "put on the new self, created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness." All these verses above powerfully unite to tell us that Christians must be marked by profoundly changed lives. Therefore, every church and ministry must have some way to bring about this change.

What are the actual agents for this change? There are two: the Word of God and the Holy Spirit. One of the most interesting features about the New Testament's teaching on Christian growth is the relationship between the Word and the Spirit. In Ephesians 5:18–21, we are told that being "filled with the Spirit" leads Christians to speak to God and one another in songs of praise, have an attitude of grateful joy in all circumstances, and submit to one another out of reverence for Christ. Then, Colossians 3:16–4:1 tells us that the "message of Christ" (which commentators identify as the gospel, the message of salvation) "dwell[ing] among [us] richly"[1] leads us to admonish one another with songs, sing to God, give thanks in all things, and submit to one another.

In other words, the verses from Ephesians and Colossians show us two aspects of one experience: being filled with the Spirit and grasping the gospel in all its richness to renew one's life. It is through the Spirit that the words of the gospel become so clear and real to the heart that it fills us with songs of joy and transforms all our relationships. On the other hand, it is through the gospel

[1] The phrase "dwell among you richly" by the word of Christ (verse 16) is a metaphorical synonym for the image of being filled by something.

that the Spirit does his work. The Spirit does not just infuse us with power in some magical and abstract way. He works to make Christ and his saving work glorious and beautiful to us (John 16:14). The Spirit works through the gospel, and the gospel becomes a life-giving power (Romans 1:16–17) through the Spirit. Spiritual renewal is gospel renewal—and vice versa.

God's grace is a dynamic, renewing power in the process of transforming our lives. The whole Bible gives testimony to this principle. When the Israelites are enslaved in Egypt, God does not give them the law and say, "Obey this, and I will save you." Rather, God delivers them by grace and *then* gives them the law, saying, as it were, "Because I saved you, obey this." Psalm 105 shows us the principle that the grace of God's salvation results in changed, holy lives. After a long list of God's saving acts, including giving Israel a land they had not "toiled for" or earned (verse 44), the psalm ends by telling us God did this "that they might keep his precepts and observe his laws" (verse 45). In other words, the result of grace—grace rightly received—is a changed life.

The prayers of Paul are rich and eloquent, but at the core of them all, we see that a faith in the gospel and a deep grasp of it are what fuel personal change. In Ephesians 1, Paul prays that his readers may know God better (verse 17). But how will that happen? Only if, with the Spirit's help, we may have the eyes of our hearts "enlightened" (verse 18) to know the riches we gain when we receive Christ (verses 18–19). In Ephesians 3, he prays that through the Spirit we "may have power … to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ" (verse 18)—in order that we may "know this love" and "be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God" (verse 19). Christians, by definition, believe "God so loved" us that he gave us his Son to die for us (John 3:16). But Paul says it is only by "grasping" and "knowing" these gospel truths more and more that we grow into the fullness of God.

One of Paul's most provocative passages about change is 2 Corinthians 3:17–18. There, he says that through the Spirit we, by faith, "contemplate" Jesus' glory, which results in a process of transformation into his image. John Owen, in his *Meditations and Discourses on the Glory of Christ*, argues that to see Christ's glory and beauty is to see Christ "clothed in his gospel." Owen shows in great detail how it is not an abstract knowledge of facts about Christ but the adoring contemplation of his character, person, and work—as they accomplish our free salvation—that shine in the heart and change us from the inside out. When we see the glory and beauty of Jesus' humanity, we see how his assumption of human nature was the only way we could be saved; only when we can see the costliness of his offering his life for us can we fully appreciate the glory and beauty of his love.

HOW GOSPEL RENEWAL TAKES PLACE IN AN INDIVIDUAL

The gospel creates a whole new motivation and passion—an inner fire, so to speak—for holiness and godly changes to our lives. The old motive was self-interest, likely a drive to be holy in order to receive blessings and acceptance into heaven. But trying to live a holy life just to get what we want is the same self-centered motivation that drives us to sin. That is why so many legalistic religious people de-convert from a life of compliance to the divine law into a life of living as they wish. In

reality, they were always obeying the law for their sake rather than for God's sake. Obedience to God was never a pleasure and an intrinsic joy but a duty—sometimes satisfying but often not. However, when we grasp and experience the gospel of God's grace and recognize that we already have all possible blessings in Christ (bought at infinite cost to him), we have a whole new motive for obeying God. We want to love him like he loves us (1 John 4:19). Now, we obey to get more of God: to resemble him more, please him more, and know him more. Now, we put our happiness in God's happiness and seek our joy in his. Now, we love God just for the beauty of who he is. This is the way of all true love. The gospel helps us to truly love God, transforming duty into choice.[2]

The gospel can also provide a new freedom from rooted sins that drive us. Martin Luther taught (rightly, I think) that you can't break Commandments Two through Ten without also breaking the First. For example, we don't lie in order to make money unless we first make having money more important than obeying God. In other words, all sin is rooted in our heart's idols (Calvin) or inordinate loves (Augustine) or false identities (Kierkegaard). We sin because we create idols, and idols are ways to find self-justification, self-worth, significance, security, meaning, and purpose in created things rather than in Jesus. They are not just false gods but false gospels: "If I have this, I will be justified, loved, and accepted."

Whatever we base our salvation and self on will be something we *have* to have—something we will do anything to have. As a result, those things enslave us and drive us. Jesus' love and justification, however, is received as a gift and cannot be achieved as a self-accomplishment. It is the only thing that brings true rest to the soul.

Though, in principle, these idols are no longer a Christian's means for justification and happiness, they remain largely as such in practice. The idols of Christians' hearts still cling to them in functional daily life. The only way to be freed from addicting, false loves is to fix the heart and mind more deeply on Jesus and grow in our active faith in the gospel. The only way to not continue to think of ourselves as "good because we're successful" or "beautiful" or "moral" is to set the mind on who we are in Christ (Colossians 3:1–3). As Thomas Chalmers puts it, "The only way to dispossess [the heart] of an old affection is by the expulsive power of a new one."[3] The process of this sanctification through growth in gospel freedom is a two-fold process of setting our hearts on Christ and "things above" and "put[ting] to death" sin within us (see Colossians 3:1–17).

The gospel does not only reorient the loves of the heart, but it also provides a framework for thinking about our behavior and practices in every area of life. The world thinks about ethics on a spectrum between moralistic legalism and relativistic antinomianism. At one end is a rigid, rule-oriented behaviorism that insists we become good through certain practices. At the other end is a rule-free emotivism that insists we create and live our own truth and become good through expressing our desires. The gospel is not a point anywhere on that spectrum; it "diagonalizes" the two alternatives of legalism and antinomianism—that is, it critiques both yet addresses the

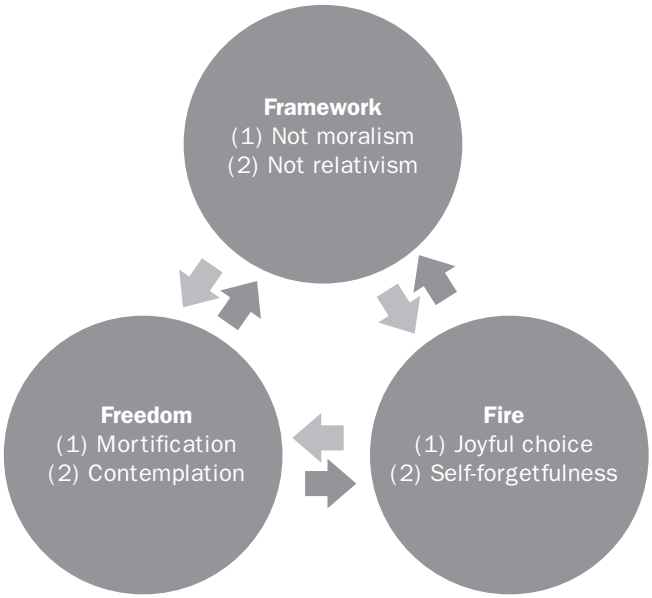
[2] See Galatians 5:6: "The only thing that counts is faith expressing itself through love."

[3] Thomas Chalmers, *The Expulsive Power of a New Affection* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2020), 6.

aspirations of both without either combining them or borrowing from them.[4] We are saved by faith alone, not our own law-keeping. However, as we have already explored, being saved inevitably leads to a new kind of law-keeping based not on selfishness but love-filled joy.

This spectrum—neither moralism nor relativism—becomes a new framework for navigating life. It tends to avoid the excesses of liberalism (leaning toward the relativistic) and conservatism (leaning toward the moralistic), but it shouldn't lead us to some kind of centrist middle ground. It leads us into unique ways of behavior and practice. Consider Paul's rebuke of Peter in Galatians 2, when Peter had fallen back into the moralism of ethnic pride and privilege. Paul does not merely say, "Peter, you need to be more open to other races and nationalities." Rather, he says that Peter was literally "not acting in line with the truth of the gospel" (verse 14). Paul argued that belief in salvation through faith and grace has major implications for the way we view other races. The gospel provides new guidelines and implications for our attitudes and behavior (see Galatians 2:11–16).

Below is a diagram showing how the new inner fire, the new freedom, and the new framework interact with each other to form personal gospel renewal.



THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN JUSTIFICATION AND SANCTIFICATION

The gospel of salvation by grace alone and faith alone through Christ alone cannot be reduced to the doctrine of justification by faith. The Reformed Protestant doctrine has long been the target of those who insist that salvation by free grace is an inhibition to change—that it undermines

[4] See the DNA paper "Worldview and Catechesis" for more information on this.

the logic and motivation for Christian change. If we are already saved and completely accepted by God without character change, the objection goes, we have no incentive for living a holy life. One liberal theologian, Albert Schweitzer, wrote, "Those who subsequently made [Luther's] doctrine of justification by faith the center of Christian belief have had the tragic experience of finding that they were dealing with a conception of redemption from which no ethic could logically be derived."[5] Schweitzer and other critics are seriously mistaken. Sanctification (change) is not something that happens despite justification or even apart from it. Sanctification is based on justification. How so?

Justification gives us assurance of God's love, providing a new motivation through grateful joy. Receiving salvation through God's free grace alone changes the motivation for holiness from one of self-interest (which is, ironically, the antithesis of godliness) to one of loving service. Article 24 of the Belgic Confession says:

> Therefore, far from making people cold toward living in a pious and holy way, this justifying faith, quite to the contrary, so works within them that apart from it they will never do a thing out of love for God but only out of love for themselves and fear of being condemned.[6]

This means that only if we know we are saved fully and freely through Christ will we do good deeds out of love for God. Before we understand the gospel, we do good deeds selfishly, as ways to feel better about ourselves and secure in our uprightness, as ways to get God to do things for us. We are acting morally in the service of self-salvation, out of the fear and pride that arise without an identity built on Christ in the gospel. If we seek to be saved by God because of our good works, then we don't help the little old lady cross the street for her sake or for God's sake. We do it for our sake. Good works, then, can't become godly and holy until we change our motive. By that logic, sanctification can't really begin without justification. It is (ironically) only when we realize our good works are not good at all and instead choose to trust in Christ alone that our good works begin to become good. Without deeply grasping grace, we will fall back into doing good to get things from God. But the more we revel in what Jesus has done for us, and the more we realize what it cost him, the more we do good for him—to love, resemble, serve, and please him. Just for *him*.

Christian submission, obedience, and surrender is only healthy and truly Christian when it is a glad, joyful, and grateful response to costly grace. That is, we see the depth of our sin, and we see the magnitude of what it cost our Savior to redeem us. In response, our obedience to him changes at its heart. It is no longer a compliance to rules that is selfish (we do it to get things for ourselves), conditional (we do it as long as we feel we are getting the blessings we think the obedience

[5] Michael Horton, *Justification, vol. 1, New Studies in Dogmatics* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2018), 353.

[6] Guido de Brès, "Belgic Confession" (Translation © 2011, Faith Alive Christian Resources, Christian Reformed Church in North America), 48.

deserves), and joyless (we do it, but it is not something we enjoy or can do indefinitely). It is a compliance that realizes we have the love of God, eternal life, and co-rulership of the universe forever.

In that light, we don't obey in order to get more things (as if we could ever obtain anything greater than a life of eternal blessing). We obey simply to love, resemble, and please the one who did all for us. We don't obey conditionally, since our obedience isn't tied to how good our circumstances are. We obey because it's tied to how full God's salvation is. We don't obey joylessly, groaning about every sacrifice we have to make and complaining whenever we don't get our way. We obey joyfully because we realize that obedience—even if it means dying for our faith—costs us nothing compared with what Jesus' love for us cost him. Because he paid that price, our "yoke" or "burden" of obedience and discipleship becomes "light" (Matthew 11:30).

In summary, when Schweitzer and others argued that salvation by sheer grace removes all logical and emotional incentive for living a holy life, they meant that it removed one main incentive—namely, that of fear. But if we lose all fear of punishment and condemnation *and* lose all incentive for moral living thereafter, the only incentive we had to obey in the first place was fear. And operating out of fear is self-absorption—the very opposite of love, which is self-giving. That is why "perfect love casts out fear" (1 John 4:18).

JUSTIFICATION AND IDOLS

Justification gives us a new relationship to created things, providing a new freedom through reordered loves. Everyone must live for something. Everyone must make something their main purpose, significance, and security. If that something is not God, then it functions as an idol, a supreme love of the heart and a false savior. If it is something we cannot live without, it also functions as a kind of master to us. The salvation of free grace liberates us from sin because it changes our relationship toward the created world. Created things become good gifts rather than idols or threats to our idols.

Once we view the world through the perspective of justification by faith, everything around us takes on a different hue. Not only is the Creator and Lawgiver now our Father, but our neighbors are no longer threats to (or ultimate sources of) our comfort, security, or happiness. They are, instead, gifts to cherish. "This confidence in God's grace and knowledge of it," Martin Luther exults, "makes men glad and bold and happy in dealing with God and all [things he has created]."[7]

The knowledge of our justification breaks the power of idols over us. They are now (usually) good things that we can rejoice in but don't ultimately need. People and circumstances that stand in the way of our success and performance can no longer take away our ultimate security, happiness, and significance. Those things are found in Christ and cannot be lost.

[7] Horton, *Justification*, 367.

A NEW IDENTITY IN LIFE

Justification gives us a new, selfless, outward-focused attitude toward all of life. The doctrine of justification creates this lack of self-absorption "at every level: in relation to God (rather than trusting in [ourselves]) and in relation to others (rather than being preoccupied with our own inner justification) … . The proclaimed announcement of these saving acts of God in Christ, [calls] sinners outside of [ourselves] to cling to Christ in faith and [to our] neighbor in love."[8]

In *Sources of the Self*, Charles Taylor traces the development of the modern identity as a "buffered self," a completely inward, self-affirming identity. It is one in which our inner desires and intuitions are more real than anything outside of us. The doctrine of justification creates a radically non-ingrown, non-self-centered identity. It both frees us and draws us out. Our salvation is found outside us, not inside. This frees us to do acts of service for God and our neighbor, not to fill an emptiness within us but as the overflow of a heart already full of love. Jesus tells us we must lose our lives to find our lives (Matthew 10:39, 16:25). Justification produces a breed of self-sacrificers, while our secular culture of buffered selves can only produce self-actualizers.

Professor and author Richard Lovelace writes:

> Only a fraction of the present body of professing Christians are solidly appropriating the justifying work of Christ in their lives … . Much that we have interpreted as a defect of sanctification in church people is really an outgrowth of their loss of bearing with respect to justification. Christians who are no longer sure that God loves and accepts them in Jesus, apart from their present spiritual achievements, are subconsciously radically insecure persons—much less secure than non-Christians, because of the constant bulletins they receive from their Christian environment about the holiness of God and the righteousness they are supposed to have. Their insecurity shows itself in pride, a fierce defensive assertion of their own righteousness and defensive criticism of others. They come naturally to hate other cultural styles and other races in order to bolster their own security and discharge their suppressed anger. They cling desperately to legal, pharisaical righteousness, but envy, jealousy, and other branches on the tree of sin grow out of their fundamental insecurity … . [Instead, with the gospel we can] start each day with a thoroughgoing stand upon Luther's platform: you are accepted, looking outward in faith and claiming the wholly alien righteousness of Christ as the only ground for acceptance, relaxing in that quality of trust which will produce increasing sanctification as faith is active in love and gratitude.[9]

[8] Horton, *Justification*, 373–74.

[9] Richard F. Lovelace, *Dynamics of Spiritual Life: An Evangelical Theology of Renewal* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2020), 101.

A TWOFOLD PROCESS

There is a twofold process for inward, gospel-empowered change. In both Ephesians 4 and Colossians 3 (see Romans 8 as well), these two tasks are given different names and descriptions. For clarity, I'll call them "killing sin" and "setting the heart."

First, let's examine what killing sin is. In both Ephesians and Colossians, the things that are being killed off are *epithumia*: inordinate, enslaving desires (translated as "deceitful desires" in Ephesians 4:22 and as "evil desires" in Colossians 3:5). Colossians 3:2 says that we all set our hearts on earthly things. We rest in them, build our lives on them, and look to them rather than to God for our identity, meaning, salvation, and love. Idols are things we believe we must have in order to live happily, and so we will overwork, exploit, lie, harm, or abuse others and even ourselves to get what our hearts desire. Killing sin is an effort to cast those idols out of our lives, to pull our hearts away from them, and to weaken or eliminate their hold on us.

Next, let's look at what it means to set the heart. This is what seventeenth-century English theologian John Owen calls "beholding the glory of Christ by faith," in reference to 2 Corinthians 3:18. It is to raise the mind and heart toward "things above" and particularly Jesus himself (Colossians 3:1–3). We gain freedom from enslaving idols only as we inflame our hearts with love for Christ as he is revealed in the Word and gospel. But there is a method to doing this. We must meditate on Christ, using appropriate biblical texts in which Christ replaces our idol. That is, he gives us the exact thing we hope to get from that idol, whether it is love, worth, security, honor, and so on. We meditate on the gloriousness of who Jesus is and what he has done until he begins to attract our heart toward himself. Only then will we no longer fix our hearts on other things. Our goal is to replace the idols in the deepest recesses of ourselves with Jesus Christ, the One who truly gives us what we need.

These two tasks are continuous and inseparable; they involve each other. We can't remove our heart's inordinate affections for power, approval, comfort, and control from one object without showing the heart a greater, more desirable, and more beautiful object: Jesus himself. Only then will sin lose its attractive power, and only then will we begin to be free. On the other hand, without the assurance and knowledge of our acceptance in Christ, the admission of our sin will be too traumatic. If our self-worth is based on being a good person rather than on Christ, we will, like Peter, be unable to admit our flaws or sins. The more we know Christ's love, the easier it will be to confess our sin, and the more we confess our sin, the more precious and wonderful the grace of Jesus will become.

THE GOSPEL FRAMEWORK FOR OUTWARD PRACTICE

The gospel is not something that only changes the inner heart of a person. It also provides a way to consider how we are to behave—how the outer person should act. Let's look at three different

case studies that examine this principle and compare the frameworks of moralistic, relativistic, and gospel-centered people.

CASE STUDY 1: CULTURE

Moralistic people tend to be proud of their culture. They can easily fall into a spirit of cultural imperialism (also called ethnocentrism), trying to attach spiritual significance to their cultural styles in order to make themselves feel morally superior to others. This happens because moralistic people are insecure—they look at the eternal law and know deep down they cannot keep it. They turn mere cultural differences into moral virtues to buttress their sense of righteousness.

Relativistic people tend to embody not a spirit of cultural imperialism, but one of cultural relativism. This approach says that truth is relative, and so every culture is beautiful in itself. Every culture must be accepted on its own terms. This, however, makes it impossible to make distinctions between evil and good in any particular culture. And ironically, many Western people who say they are relativistic about culture actually look down on traditional cultures that are *not* relativistic. In this way, even the relativists tend to be ethnocentric. (This is more evidence that moralism and relativism, for all their apparent differences, are both forms of self-salvation.)

But here's the gospel's approach. The gospel leads us to be somewhat critical of all cultures, including our own (since there is a moral standard, God's law, against which no human culture can stand blameless). Yet Christians who know they are sinners saved by sheer grace can feel morally superior to no one. After all, we are saved by grace alone, and it is therefore possible for a non-Christian neighbor or person of another culture to be wiser or more moral than we are. This gives the gospel-centered Christian a radically different posture from either moralists or relativists.[10]

CASE STUDY 2: SUFFERING

Moralistic people have a major problem when suffering strikes them. Why? The whole point of moralism is to put God in their debt. Moralistic people feel that God owes them a safe life because of their goodness. So, when suffering hits them, the moralistic heart is forced to either feel terrific anger toward God (if they feel they have been living up to moral standards) or terrific anger toward themselves (if they feel they haven't been living up to moral standards). They will either think, *I hate God*, or *I hate myself*, or they will swing back and forth between both positions. Relativistic people are more likely to become bitter against life or God, since they don't feel they deserve troubles in life at all.

Here's the gospel's approach. On one hand, the gospel humbles us out of being mad at God. Jesus, the very best person who ever lived, suffered terribly. This demolishes the idea that good people

[10] It should not be too hard for readers to apply this to the current political polarization in the U.S. The political right shows the moralistic, uncritical support of traditional (white-dominated) Euro-centric culture, while the left's ostensible pluralism and cultural relativism is actually a moralistic, progressive cosmopolitanism that looks down on traditional cultures' values.

should have good lives, and bad people should have bad lives. If God himself was willing to become involved in terrible suffering out of love, then we should not think ourselves exempt. As gospel-centered people, we are also affirmed out of feeling guilty or mad at ourselves. Jesus suffered and died for us "while we were still sinners" (Romans 5:8). The trouble we are experiencing at the moment may be designed to wake us up (Hebrews 12:4–11), but it can't be a quid pro quo punishment for our sins. Jesus received the punishment for our sins. If we realize that we are accepted in Christ, then (and only then) will suffering humble and strengthen us rather than embitter and weaken us. As others have said, Jesus suffered not that we might not suffer but that we could become like him when we do.

CASE STUDY 3: DESPONDENCY AND DISCOURAGEMENT

To a person who is depressed, the moralist says, "You are breaking the rules; repent."

The relativist says, "You just need to love and accept yourself."

But (assuming there is no physiological basis for depression) the gospel leads us to examine ourselves and say, "Something in my life has become more important than God—a pseudo-savior." The gospel leads us to repentance, but not to merely set our will against superficialities. It is without the gospel that superficialities will be addressed instead of the heart. The moralist will work on behavior, and the relativist will work on the emotions themselves.

We have seen that the gospel is the way that everything is renewed and transformed by Christ—whether it be a heart, a relationship, a church, or a community. Therefore, all our problems come from a lack of orientation to the gospel. All pathologies in the church and all its ineffectiveness come from a failure to think out the deep implications of the gospel, to grasp and believe it through and through, and to apply it in a radical way. Put positively, the gospel transforms our hearts, thinking, and approaches to absolutely everything. City to City believes that if the gospel is expounded and applied in its fullness in any church, that church will look unique. People will find moral conviction as well as compassion and flexibility.

LOOKING AHEAD TO GOSPEL RENEWAL IN THE CHURCH

With an eye toward the next paper, "Gospel Renewal in the Church," what does it mean for a church or ministry to be gospel-centered? Those who speak about the gospel as not merely the means of salvation but also the means for growth and renewal in the Spirit sometimes call themselves gospel-centered. The problem with the term, of course, is that it can come across as arrogant—and if our hearts are not in the right place, it may actually *be* arrogant! Every Christian church and organization claim they are based on the gospel, so to insist that our DNA is "gospel-centered" sounds like a way to imply no one else holds to the gospel. Therefore, in many contexts we may not want to use the term.

Nevertheless, if we use the term and unpack it well, it has some advantages. It is a way to signal that we are a cross-denominational movement, unified around the heart of Christianity—the

gospel—and not one to fight over secondary issues. Renewal movements have historically understood themselves as recovering and proclaiming the gospel with a new clarity. The Protestant Reformation, the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century awakenings, and many major church renewals understood themselves this way.

What does it mean to be gospel-centric in ministry? On the basis of what we looked at in this paper (and the next), it means:

- To be gospel-centered rather than legalistic. A church or ministry culture can be legalistic even with a formal affirmation of the doctrine of justification by faith alone.
- To be gospel-centered rather than antinomian. A church or ministry culture can have a relativistic attitude if it does not stress the imperative of change into Christlikeness or, if afraid of the criticism of the world, it fails to speak the truth clearly and unapologetically.
- To be gospel-centered rather than triumphalist. A church or ministry culture can be triumphalist if it is unwilling to admit its weaknesses and repent honestly when it does wrong. It must continually reform and reassess its effectiveness.
- To be gospel-centered rather than behavioristic. A church or ministry culture can be behavioristic if it puts direct pressure on the will in a demanding, authoritarian way. Churches that understand how the gospel reorders our loves put emphasis on matters of the heart instead and engage the mind and emotions persuasively.
- To be gospel-centered rather than separatist. A church or ministry culture can be separatist if, through a lack of orientation to the gospel, it is legalistic and triumphalist. This will likely result in churches becoming sectarian and feeling superior to other denominations or traditions. They will feel that wisdom perishes with them. A gospel-centered church is more willing to partner and collaborate with others.

RESOURCES

A good general text on gospel renewal is Richard Lovelace's *Dynamics of Spiritual Life*, updated ed., IVP, 2020.

The classic text on what we call "killing sin" is John Owen's "On the Mortification of Sin in Believers," in *The Works of John Owen*, vol. 6, ed. William H. Goold, Banner of Truth, 1967, 2–88.

The classic texts on what we have been calling "setting the mind" are John Owen's "On the Grace and Duty of Being Spiritually Minded," in *The Works of John Owen*, vol. 7, ed. William H. Goold, Banner of Truth, 1967; and Owen's *Meditations and Discourses on the Glory of Christ* (available online).

ADDITIONAL READING RECOMMENDED BY CITY TO CITY

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Tripp, Paul. *Dangerous Calling: Confronting the Unique Challenges of Pastoral Ministry*. Crossway, 2012.

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PART FOUR

Gospel Renewal in the Church

The gospel does not only renew individuals; it also renews churches. Personal gospel renewal and corporate gospel renewal overlap, of course, but the church is not merely an aggregation of individuals. The saying "the whole is greater than the sum of the parts" holds more truth for the church than for any other human community. The church is a temple of the Holy Spirit, built up with Christians as living stones (1 Peter 2:4–8). It is a new humanity, a royal priesthood, an alternate nation (1 Peter 2:9–10). There are ways that God brings new life and vitality to his church that are more than just the sum of the ways he brings renewal to individuals.

The history of group-wide renewal is made up of numerous events.[1] The Bible alone has many examples of corporate gospel renewal, such as those in the books of Judges, Kings, and Chronicles with their cycles of renewal and decline; the many psalms that describe those cycles (Psalm 107, for example); and the book of Acts with its depiction of the growth of the early church and its series of missional breakthroughs and descents of the Spirit. Centuries later, the monastic movement transformed Europe. The Lutheran Pietist movement, the Moravians, and the Methodist awakenings occurred in the eighteenth century. The nineteenth century saw revivals, and the twentieth saw mass conversion in Korea and East Africa—and there have been plenty of other, more localized seasons of great spiritual harvest throughout the world in the past two thousand years.

THEOLOGICAL PRESENCES IN CHURCH RENEWAL

To study this history is to ask two questions. What seem to be the common factors that these renewals all exhibit? And what factors are changeable and should not be insisted on in every situation? The answer is that the renewals are too varied to provide any absolute list of things that must *always* be present in the same forms. Nevertheless, our study can give us a number of what I will call "usual presences."[2]

[1] In the twentieth century, scholars such as Richard Lovelace, Howard A. Snyder, J. Edwin Orr, Timothy L. Smith, and others studied the patterns of revivals. This paper relies on the work of Lovelace and Snyder. One limitation is that nearly all of these scholars' studies were only on Western, transatlantic revivals and mainly in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. We need a new generation of scholars that continue to look at renewals and awakenings around the world, including those in Africa, Asia, and Latin America.

[2] These presences are mainly taken from Richard F. Lovelace, *Dynamics of Spiritual Life: An Evangelical Theology of Renewal* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2020); and Howard Snyder, *Signs of the Spirit: How God Reshapes the Church* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 1997), which look at the European and American awakenings. However, similar elements were present in the East African and Korean revivals.

Gospel rediscovery—both conceptual and experiential. In instances of church renewal, there is always a recovery of the gospel. The default mode of the human heart is to try to save one's own self and achieve righteousness through one's works. This tendency can show up in a variety of resolutions, such as an effort to justify oneself by being morally immaculate and obeying the Bible, or an attempt to gain self-worth by "making the world a better place." But revival proceeds from a rediscovery of the wonder of grace, the radical reality of Christ accomplishing salvation on our behalf. This recovery happens both in thinking and in feeling.

We more clearly understand the doctrines concerning grace, and we also experience assurance, love, and joy. Christians technically believe that "Jesus accepts me; therefore, I live a good life," but our hearts can easily reverse this and practically function on the principle that "I live a good life; therefore, Jesus accepts me." The results of this reversal include pride, defensiveness, a critical spirit, racial prejudice and cultural ethnocentrism, a reluctance to change, and other forms of spiritual anemia. There is neither a deep humble spirit of repentance nor the high joy of being assured by God's unchanging love. This attitude, unfortunately, tends to be our default mode. Even in churches with orthodox doctrine, it is the stasis churches tend to gravitate toward over the years, unless some sort of renewal dynamic corrects the course.

New forms of contextualized ministry. While revivals always have an orientation to the past to recover older truths and doctrines that the church has forgotten, they also have a strong orientation to the present moment. Revivals address the current cultural context in ways that the church has failed to do. In many cases, renewal movements usually run against cultural trends, as in the eighteenth-century Wesleyan revivals, which were reactions against the increasing unbelief stemming from the Enlightenment. The twentieth-century East African Revival reacted against both the inroads of modern theology that undermined beliefs in the Bible and the atonement, as well as corruption in the church.[3]

At the same time, revivals are marked by creatively adapting to the cultural moment. They can do things in new ways to fit the current context. When thousands of people moved into cities, uprooted from their traditional parishes by the Industrial Revolution, the Methodists relied on a radical new approach—outdoor preaching. The 1857 Revival in downtown New York City happened through a network of lay-led workday noontime prayer meetings that exploded in number during a Wall Street panic that shook the population.

Revivals not only create innovation within local churches, but they also usually generate new parachurch ministries or "sodalities," including educational institutions, social reform movements, and so on.[4] No renewal or revival is like the last one. Revivals both push back on the cultural moment and yet adjust to meet it. (You can never get back into Narnia the same way twice!)

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[3] R. MacMaster and D. Jacobs, *A Gentle Wind of God: The Influence of the East Africa Revival* (Harrisonburg, VA: Herald Press, 2006).

[4] See R. Winter, "The Two Structures of God's Redemptive Mission," http://www.undertheiceberg.com/wp-content/uploads/2006/04/Sodality-Winter%20on%20Two%20Structures1.pdf.

SPIRITUAL PRESENCES IN CHURCH RENEWAL

Extraordinary prayer. Just like renewal, there is not just a personal version of prayer but also a corporate one. When an entire church joins together to pray, that prayer can be prevailing, kingdom-centered, and extraordinary. This is not prayer that is short, perfunctory, and focused purely on material needs inside the church or within our personal networks. Prayer that accompanies renewal has more of both an outward and inward focus. The inward focus asks for grace to confess sins and humble ourselves, to know God, see his glory, and experience his love and assurance. The outward focus asks for compassion and zeal to reach the lost, to see the church flourish and grow with new converts. When listening to a prayer meeting, it is not hard to tell whether these traits are present. Study how praying for revival led to it in Acts 4, Exodus 33, and Nehemiah 1.

A "lower" and "higher" spiritual experience. The recovery of the gospel of grace, which gives Christians infinitely greater security in God's love (Romans 8:15–17), leads us to simultaneously go "lower" and "higher." It can bring us low because revivals are often marked by an increase in repentance and confession of sin—and these are often public restitutions for past wrongdoing. The Korean and Welsh revivals of the early twentieth century were particularly marked by this. But we can also be lifted high, as there is a marked increase in joy and assurance of God's presence through the Spirit in corporate worship.

Individuals as models of revival. When individuals are changed by the gospel, they become what Paul called "living epistles" for all to read (2 Corinthians 3:1–3). They become living models of a gospel-transformed life. Such individuals serve as a powerful sign of plausibility that makes the church credible in the eyes of many others, and they sometimes act as a magnet that attracts and draws others toward the message that changed their life. The history of revivals sometimes speaks of a single dramatic conversion that sparks a movement of the gospel in a particular town or region.

STRUCTURAL PRESENCES IN CHURCH RENEWAL

Small groups. A surprisingly cross-cultural feature of revivals is that of *ecclesiola in ecclesia*, or "little churches within the church." Renewals spread through small group meetings of those who have been revitalized by the gospel. Sometimes the groups are formed (and spread) spontaneously—those touched by the revival come together for encouragement and draw in family and friends, who then experience the new spiritual power. Often, however, leaders of the revival organize and spread it through well-planned systems of bands, classes, house churches, or home cell groups. These groups are usually not so much places of instruction as places of pastoral care and mutual spiritual accountability. The principle is that we mainly grow into Christlikeness through deep community and mutual ministry with fellow Christians.

Lay ministry. There has never been a revival in which the ordained clergy and top leaders maintained strict control and performed all ministry functions. Again, the increase in lay ministry is unplanned and spontaneous. Renewed individuals naturally become more proactive evangelists, leaders of small groups, and initiators of various new ministries and social reforms in their neighborhoods. Many renewal movements have put explicit emphasis on the biblical doctrine of the priesthood of all believers, so they allow lay participation and leadership in many roles traditionally reserved for the ordained ministry. (As might be expected, controversy often swirls around this.)

Anointed leaders. In virtually every instance, God uses a number of dynamic leaders to catalyze renewals. We must be careful here. The world's understanding of a "dynamic leader" is a charismatic CEO who gathers and maintains power. But gospel renewal produces as much repentance and humility as it does boldness and confidence, and therefore the key leaders of history's revivals do not fit a common template or profile. God chooses and uses an enormous variety of leaders.

Daniel Rowland and Howell Harris were leaders in the eighteenth-century revival in Wales. Though Rowland was ordained and more culturally refined, Harris was uneducated and unordained. Yet, both of them were key figures. George Whitefield, one of the leaders of the eighteenth-century Great Awakening, was an electrifying preacher and one of the greatest orators in church history, but he was not a good organizer and manager. John Wesley, the eighteenth-century leader of the Methodist movement, was a more ordinary speaker, but an organizational genius. It is also not surprising that God raised up and used Simeon Nsibambi in the twentieth-century revival in Africa, Gil Seon-ju in nineteenth- and twentieth-century movements in Korea, and Count Zinzendorf in eighteenth-century Germany—leaders remarkably diverse in both their gifts and their limitations. There is no divine job description for a leader in revival, but God always raises them up.

MISSIONAL PRESENCES IN CHURCH RENEWAL

Lay-driven evangelism. Unless they are very short, revivals lead to remarkable church growth and many conversions. These renewed churches are extraordinarily mission-oriented. Christians, small groups, ministries, and churches multiply rapidly. The East African Revival of the mid-twentieth century is the reason that today the Anglican churches of Uganda and Kenya have 11 million and 5 million members respectively, while the entire Episcopal church in the U.S. has 1.3 million members in total. But the most important feature of renewed church evangelism is this: it is almost wholly driven by spontaneous one-on-one evangelism by empowered lay people, not by organized evangelistic programs or well-oiled evangelistic organizations. Church growth and conversions happen because at least 10 to 20 percent of ordinary Christians in each church are actively evangelizing within their personal relationships. During some revivals, classes, societies, or other home meetings are established where Christians and non-Christians come together to talk about faith. These might be called halfway points between one-to-one evangelism and corporate worship.

Social reform and loving the poor. Timothy L. Smith and other scholars have noted how

often revivals show great concern for the poor and lead to social reforms. The East African Revival pointed out corruption both in the leadership of the church and the government. The eighteenth-century transatlantic awakenings led to reforms such as the abolition of slavery and the passing of child labor laws. Early nineteenth-century revivals led to an enormous network of various social reform organizations called the "Benevolent Empire."

Oftentimes, the logical implications of revivals take time to work themselves out into public theology. For example, the eighteenth-century American revivalist preacher Jonathan Edwards was a slaveholder, but his son and all of Edwards' mentored disciples turned into passionate abolitionists. In short, when gospel theology takes hold, it leads to both passionate evangelism and social action, and to both being a witness (the first half of Luke 10) and loving one's neighbor (the second half of Luke 10). It leads to both doing justice and telling people they cannot be reconciled to God and *will not* go to heaven if they don't put their faith in Christ. Thus, renewed churches shatter most worldly political categories.

RELATIONAL PRESENCES IN CHURCH RENEWAL

Good relationships between renewed churches and sub-movements. One of the marks of revivals is collaboration between churches and movements with a common commitment to gospel renewal, even if they have different traditions, denominations, and certain theological conclusions. Howard Snyder points out that while eighteenth-century Lutheran Pietists, Moravians, and British Methodists were quite different in many ways, the leaders visited one another and wrote and learned from one another. Such good relationships across differences require a humility and a joy that only the Holy Spirit can give, using the gospel as a guide. In the past, the divisions that were formidable were nonetheless surmounted, such as those between Calvinist and Arminian, Baptist and Presbyterian, or Anglican, Lutheran, and Reformed. Today, the divisions may be more pronounced between Pentecostals and non-charismatics, between complementarians and egalitarians, between different ethnic groups, and especially between those with more conservative and liberal politics. But revivals have lasting influence, to the degree that these secondary doctrinal and political issues are overcome, genuine friendships are established, and mutual learning and encouragement occurs.

Nevertheless, maintaining good relationships across these divides takes effort. Revivals are, at the very least, implicit critiques of the institutional church as it is. Leaders often explicitly call out the church for things such as worldliness, nominalism, abuse of power, and other sins. The danger is that a revival movement becomes so harshly critical and self-righteous that it ceases to have any good influence on the broader church. Indeed, many local churches have been split because of revivals. Revivals often attract criticism for a number of reasons, and keeping a good relationship with the rest of a church and a denomination takes patience and humility on all sides.[5]

[5] See D. M. Lloyd-Jones, "Ecclesiola in Ecclesia" at https://www.the-highway.com/ecclesia_Lloyd-Jones.html.
Notice the questions that come at the end of the article. They are typical critiques of revivals from the institutional church.

RENEWAL WITHIN CHURCHES

What happens when a whole church recaptures and rediscovers the gospel? Three things often occur.

First, nominal Christians profess to have been converted. There are many people in any church who think of themselves as Christians, but they are actually moralistic people like the elder brother in Luke 15's parable of the prodigal son. When the gospel is proclaimed clearly and distinguished sharply from religion and irreligion, such people realize that moralism is not Christianity. Many of them truly convert and will say things like, "After spending a while in this ministry, I came to see that I never really understood the gospel," or "I was shocked to conclude that I wasn't really a Christian at all, despite being an active churchgoer for years."

Second, many spiritually dry, immature, non-growing Christians experience God and begin to grow. All churches have believers whose grasp on the gospel is strong enough for them to be saved but who have not thought out its implications. Such people are often grumpy, have little to no real experience of God's love, and are filled with inordinate anger, envy, and anxiety because they have not been applying the gospel to their lives. These people, whom we could call "sleepy Christians," wake up and begin to grow. In particular, many of them begin to feel the exhilaration of being assured about their salvation for the first time. Take Romans 8:15–16, for example: "the Spirit you received brought about your adoption to sonship. And by him we cry, '*Abba*, Father.' The Spirit himself testifies with our spirit that we are God's children."

Third, many non-believers are attracted to the church and find faith. The beautified Christian community becomes a place that can both attract skeptics and non-believers and accommodate their long-term presence as they consider the claims of Christ. In times of renewal, outsiders profess to have never met Christians with whom they could have meaningful conversations and not feel condemned, or to have never visited a church they felt comfortable attending. Through a process of speaking the truth in love to them over time, many skeptical about Christianity convert.

RENEWAL ACROSS CHURCHES

When we look at the churches that experience gospel renewal, we see a combination of the following strengths. (This follows Acts 2:42–47, where all of these traits are seen in the earliest church.)

Vibrant worship. In revivals, the gospel drops into the depths of the heart, becoming a spiritual reality. Preaching isn't simply a lecture, nor is worship a glorified Sunday school class. Both are vibrant. Of course, different people groups have rather different ideas of what level of emotional intensity is balanced and what is too much. Some people find silence to be extremely important to emotional engagement, while others find that quiet "quenches the spirit" and prefer a lot of loud sounds. No particular approach to worship can possibly touch the hearts of every kind of person. Nevertheless, worship must be a real-life, passionate engagement of the whole person.

There must be a sense of God's presence, whether it is presented in a high-church, liturgical style, a more passionate charismatic style, or something in between.

Theological depth of teaching. In revivals, it's not just our emotions that are affected; the truth of the gospel takes root in our hearts. To use an analogy from Jonathan Edwards, we can intellectually know that honey is sweet without having ever tasted it. But it's only when we taste it for ourselves that we can truly appreciate its sweetness. In the same way, we can know about God without knowing God personally through an actual encounter. But in order to know him personally, we (ordinarily) need to know something about him. The Bible must be understood through the power of the Spirit before it can become real to the heart. And, of course, the gospel must be deeply grasped with the mind and distinguished from the world's alternatives before it can rejoice and reorder our hearts. That means the gospel must be understood. Therefore, there must be real, solid, intelligent teaching in the church.

Rich community and fellowship. Revival brings with it a distinct sense of community and mutual character formation among Christians. When people come to grips with the meaning and power of the gospel for the first time, they usually sense that it should change every aspect of their lives. But they aren't always sure how that will work practically. Some of what they need can come to them through good, gospel-centered teaching, preaching, and reading. However, reading books will not be enough, and neither will attending worship services and listening to sermons. What they really need is a set of Christian friends who are ahead of them in terms of growth—people with whom they can constantly converse about how to apply the gospel in daily life.

Role models are also essential. For example, if you are a young woman, you need to see gospel-changed lives in other women like you who are your age or somewhat older. The same thing goes for everyone. Americans in particular are blind to the fact that our character is more a product of our community than it is of our individual choices. Whom we habitually spend time with molds us far more than we realize. Character is formed by community. And unless we have close personal friendships with other Christians, our character will never change. Renewed churches have a vibrant community that both attracts and forms people with the gospel.

Lovingly assertive evangelism. By "lovingly assertive evangelism," I do not mean that a gospel-renewed church necessarily has effective evangelism programs. Rather, the history of revivals shows that it was not programs or great speakers but Christian people themselves who became the dynamic force for evangelism. In renewed churches, congregants are transformed into people who are humble and kind enough (because they know they are undeserving sinners) to attract others, but courageous enough (because they know God loves them unconditionally in Christ) to open their mouths and talk to others about the Christian faith. If we are bold but not humble, we are lousy at representing the gospel to others. If we are humble but not bold, we don't even try! But the gospel is that we are *simul justus et peccator*—simultaneously sinful yet, in Christ, totally loved. That makes us humble and bold at the same time. A church with even 5 to 10 percent of its people displaying gospel character will draw in inquirers.

Concern for the poor and social justice. In renewed churches, the gospel changes both the attitude of the poor toward themselves (James 1:9) and the attitude of the better-off toward the poor (James 1:10). If we turn up our nose at the poor, then we may say we are sinners saved by grace, but we don't really believe it. When Christians who are transformed by the gospel see a poor person, they realize that, without Christ, this is how they would spiritually appear to God. But Jesus, though he was spiritually rich, became poor to save us (2 Corinthians 8:9). This inclines us to the needs of the poor.

Richard Lovelace has a chapter in *Dynamics of Spiritual Life* titled "The Spiritual Roots of Social Concern," showing how historical revival usually led to social reforms, or at least an enormous increase in help for the poor and needy, such as assisting orphanages, campaigning for the abolition of slavery, and so on. There is a tendency for conservative (usually moralistic) churches to be strong in evangelism and weak in social concern, and there is a tendency for liberal (usually relativistic) churches to be strong in social concern but weak in evangelism. But the gospel of free grace produces a concern for both. Jesus created body and soul, and he will eventually redeem and restore them both. In renewed churches, there is concern for both.

Cultural flexibility. One of the keys to a renewed church is that it neither over- nor under-adapts to the surrounding culture. If a church under-adapts to the culture around it—if there is no change from the way things were done fifty years ago—no one will be changed by its ministry. They won't listen to it. It's simply too strange! People who are afraid to change have usually made an idol out of the older culture's way of doing things. In that case, they don't have gospel freedom. They cling to older cultural ways out of spiritual insecurity.

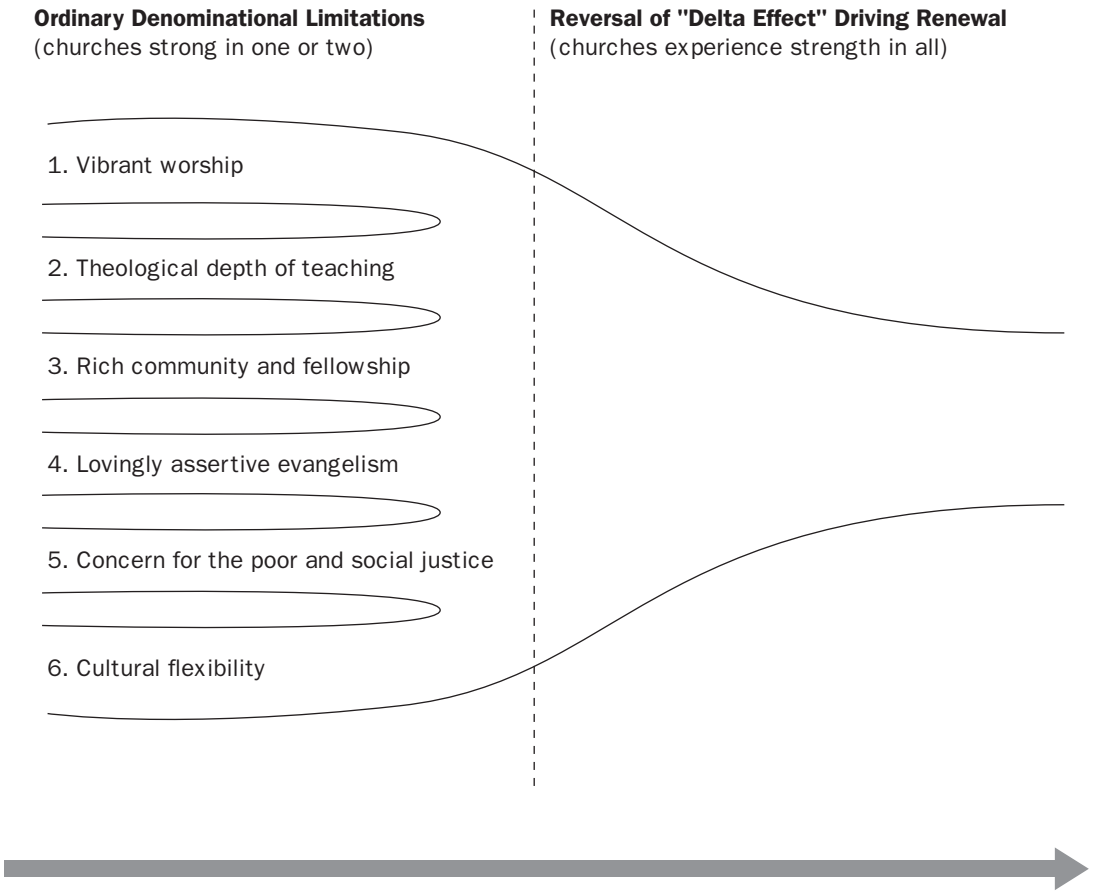
But on the other hand, if you over-adapt to the culture, if you are willing to compromise on the basics of biblical teaching to make yourself more palatable to society, if you only give people what they want, then no one will be changed by your ministry either. People who do this have likely made an idol out of the existing culture's way of doing things.

In renewed churches, however, there is a balance. Moralistic religion can give us such a superiority complex that we don't want to change anything. Or it can give us such an inferiority complex that we want to change everything so people will like us. But churches renewed by the gospel are free to contextualize without compromise.[6]

Note: Most denominations and traditions have one or two of the strengths listed above but not the others. In times of revival, they combine and cohere. When large rivers approach the coast, they often divide into a great number of smaller tributaries. In the same way, when the renewal wanes, this "delta effect" sets in and each denomination goes back to majoring in one or two of these strengths and disregarding the others. City to City's DNA aims to resist this delta effect.

[6] For more information on this, see the DNA paper "Contextualization."

Renewal Across Churches



THE INTERNAL-EXTERNAL DYNAMIC

Revived churches grow through conversions via an internal-external dynamic. Internally, the community is beautified by gospel-renewed individuals. Externally, renewed believers are both more active in evangelism and attractively effective in engaging with those outside the church.

INTERNAL: ATTRACTIVE COMMUNITY

Deuteronomy 4:5–8 calls Israel to obey all the laws of God "for this will show your wisdom and understanding to the nations, who will … say, 'Surely this great nation is a wise and understanding people. … What other nation is so great as to have such righteous decrees and laws?'" In other words, Israel obeying the law of God would create such a counterculture of justice and peace that the non-believing nations would see it and be attracted to God. Acts 2:42–47 shows the early

Christian church combining all the signs we just listed of corporate spiritual renewal: vibrant worship ("praising God … in the temple courts … in their homes"), solid teaching ("apostles' teaching"), strong fellowship ("were together and had everything in common"), care for the needy ("sold property and possessions to give to anyone who had need"), and as a result, "the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved." The beautified community attracted people who became converted.

Two things in particular stand out as being attractive.

A ministry of deeds. The first is practical service to those in need. In Acts 2, we can already see that the church's habit of liquidating property in order to share money and possessions with those in need is part of what draws people. And there is testimony to this that is even more explicit. One of the Roman emperors, Julian the Apostate, tried to rejuvenate paganism against surging Christianity and found that one of the reasons he failed was because Christians were so dedicated to caring for the poor. He wrote to a pagan priest to complain about it: "Let us consider that nothing has so much contributed to the progress of the superstition of Christians, as their charity to strangers … . The impious Galileans provide not only for their own poor, but for ours also."

The interdependent poles of deep humility and high boldness. As we have noted, the gospel creates a unique self-image that combines two personal traits that are ordinarily seen as opposing extremes on a spectrum. People with feelings of inferiority are humble but lack confidence. At the other end are those with a superiority complex. They have boldness but lack humility. The reason these are seen as opposite poles that cannot meet is because the default mode of the heart (as well as all other religions and philosophies) seeks salvation and justification through good works. If that is our heart's way of operating, then we are humble if we feel we are not living up to our own standards, or confident if we think we are. But churches renewed by the gospel produce people who are both humble and bold, and this unique and crucial combination makes us evangelists. If even 10 percent of believers in a church are renewed by the gospel in such a way, it automatically moves them into "inclusive relationships"—that is, into relationships with non-believers in which they can talk frankly, patiently, respectfully, yet penetratingly about the Christian faith.

Returning to the parable of the prodigal son, many non-believers are "younger brothers" who have stayed away from Christianity and the church because they see the off-putting "elder brother" traits of so many church members. They want nothing to do with the self-righteousness, defensiveness, narrowness, and grumpiness of moralistic people. They conclude that Christianity is simply a version of moralism. But when they see changes in the lives of both the once-nominal, now-converted members and the once-immature, now-growing members, they become interested in Christianity for the first time. Many of them come into the church and hear the gospel, and they too are converted because they now see the difference between religion and Christianity. Now, they see the transformation of their identity—the new birth—that is at the heart of the gospel.

EXTERNAL: INCLUSIVE RELATIONSHIPS AND COMMUNITY

As we have observed above, gospel-renewed individuals become far better evangelists and witnesses even without the help of programs or training. Evangelism happens spontaneously and organically, and it is one of the features of *so many* historic renewals. Gospel-renewed individuals do not fearfully act like non-believers around non-believers, only showing their Christian selves to other Christians. Rather, they create inclusive relationships in which they genuinely befriend non-believers and share their true Christian selves with them, but in a way that respects their doubts and questions, and shows great patience and kindness to them regardless of whether they believe or not.

But another feature of gospel-renewed communities is that the church itself often becomes a space in which non-believers feel welcomed and can process the claims of Christ over a period of time. Such churches are relatively rare. Liberal, mainline churches make doubters feel welcome, but there they are rarely challenged to repent and believe. Most conservative churches are places that non-believers are indeed challenged to repent (if they ever are present), but usually this is done so in ways that confuse them and, at worst, unnecessarily offend them. In contrast, many renewal movements create "spiritually inclusive" Christian communities where biblical teaching and authentic worship take place, but in such a way that non-believers feel loved and respected, as well as challenged.[7] What are some of the features of such a church or community?

Creating "in-between space." In any culture, those who are skeptical of Christianity believe "all of those Christians are like X or Y." But spiritually inclusive Christian communities defy the traditional categories and stereotypes that non-believers in any particular culture have of Christian churches. For example, in the late '80s, New York City's churches were labeled either "fundamentalist" or "liberal-mainline." But Redeemer Presbyterian Church sought to defy those stereotypes by combining or avoiding traits that characterized the other categories. One of the main ways this was done was by using the gospel as one of three ways to live, not two. In other words, the gospel was used to critique not only non-belief and relativism, but also prejudice, bigotry, and moralism.

Leveling the field. In any culture, skeptics about Christianity think of themselves as occupying a higher ground epistemologically. In the secular West (and even many global cities outside the West), people think of themselves as being grounded in reason and science, while religious people take blind leaps of faith. In other cultures, they may think of themselves as being grounded in faith (e.g., Islam or Hinduism or Shintoism) that is true to their people and culture, while Christianity is a foreign intrusion.

In any case, the gospel gives us resources for leveling the field. In the West, for example, it can be argued that all knowledge is based on faith. It is based on commitments of the heart that cannot be rationally proved but can be compared and weighed against each other. Using the concept

[7] One example of this was the L'Abri movement, which had a significant impact on the evangelical church, and which saw a generation of young skeptics brought to faith.

of idols to describe sin—loving created things more than God—can also be a way to talk about sin to relativists. Within this framework, everyone, including supposedly non-religious people, is still seeking justification and meaning, and is therefore seeking what Christianity offers. In non-Western contexts, renewed churches use the gospel to deconstruct religion in general and show the distinctions between Christianity and other religions. This includes highlighting that Christianity is not a belief of a national origin and culture, but one that makes fundamental claims about reality.

Making non-believers "ratified participants." Rather than making non-believers feel like trespassers, renewed churches make them feel like ratified participants by doing some of the following:

- earning credibility by showing deep acquaintance with authorities, writings, beliefs, and philosophies that command the respect of the non-believer in their culture;
- using shared vocabulary rather than insider evangelical language or lots of theological, technical terms;
- addressing the doubts and questions non-believers ask in a direct, respectful, and regular manner;
- persuading not simply through contradiction but through appreciative critique and redirecting the person to Christ. This is not saying, "You are totally wrong," but rather, "You are right about X. But if you believe X, why don't you believe Y? If you want X, you will find it only in Christ."

As a result of all this, the spiritually inclusive community does not engage in "code switching," where there is one approach when non-Christians are present and another when they are not. Instead, it consistently speaks about non-Christians and disbelief in the same way, regardless of whether non-Christians are present. That is, there is one way to discuss skepticism about Christianity that everyone should be able to hear. The evangelistic methods stated above are not forsaken when people feel they are "behind closed doors" inside the church.

In summary, new believers coming into a community make it even more vibrant and beautiful, and the more vibrant and beautiful the community is, the more renewed believers are inspired to foster inclusive relationships.[8]

CITY IMPACT

In *Signs of the Spirit*, Howard A. Snyder lists several aspects of spiritual renewal:

- "personal" or individual;
- "corporate," by which he means the "ecclesial" church;
- "structural," by which he means new models of ministries, both within the church and in new parachurch ministries;
- "theological," by which he means both the retrieval of forgotten doctrines from the past and new contextualization of orthodox doctrines in the present; and
- "missiological," by which he means the church's impact on the world and society.

[8] These features are looked at in more depth in the DNA paper "Evangelism."

This is what City to City has called "City Impact"—the church's widened ministry in evangelism, doing justice, the integration of faith and work, and the accompanying influence on the culture and society. Snyder concludes by showing how these aspects of spiritual renewal can and should interlock. He says that renewal must be both personal and ecclesial to be genuine, it must become structural and theological to be lasting, and finally, it must be missiological to be biblically dynamic.[9]

[9] Snyder, *Signs of the Spirit*, 292.

ADDITIONAL READING RECOMMENDED BY CITY TO CITY

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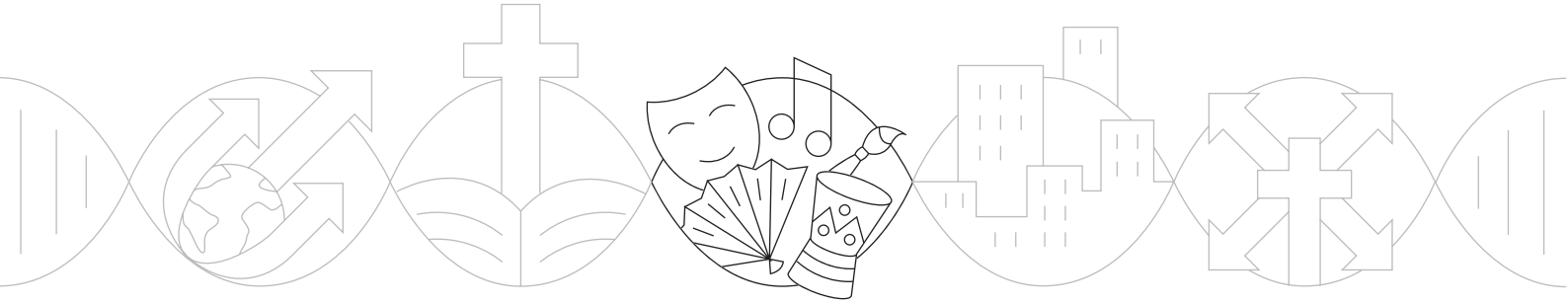

Culture

Because the gospel must
critique and incarnate
in every culture, we:

- *Believe Christ satisfies and surpasses the highest aspirations of our culture without succumbing to its idols.*
- *Design ministries in language and forms that reach the heart of our culture.*
- *Faithfully and persuasively engage our public square.*

PART FIVE

Worldview and Catechesis

City to City's DNA has always included aspects of ministry, such as contextualization, evangelism, apologetics, the integration of faith and work, and cultural engagement. But doing any of these things in our culture requires us to understand its belief structures. This immediately poses a challenge. How are we to understand the "beliefs" of a culture? Do American, Indian, Brazilian, or Japanese societies simply have a list of beliefs written down somewhere? Not at all. Yet it is obvious that these various cultures are sharply different in many ways, and it has something to do with their basic beliefs about life. American culture, for example, puts far less emphasis on family than many other cultures and is far more individualistic. The question to ask, then, is "Why?"

These cultures are also not monolithic—each of them has competing points of view among its people. The best way to assess a culture's beliefs is to consider them through the lens of worldviews. Each culture is an overlapping matrix of multiple worldviews that are often related but not identical. And, in the end, a worldview is much more than a set of beliefs.

WHAT IS A WORLDVIEW?

For our purposes, a worldview refers to an individual's basic beliefs about the nature of things. Everyone has a set of non-scientific, non-provable beliefs about human nature, purpose, and morality that is the basis for how they make their decisions, including how they spend their time, whom they admire and imitate, what they spend their money on, and so forth.

Worldviews are inevitable. We experience the world through our senses and observation, and then unavoidably seek to make sense of what we see. Human beings ask certain, abiding big questions about ultimate reality, and we can't function without assuming at least tentative answers. Immanuel Kant said there were three basic questions: What can I know? What must I do? For what can I hope?[1] Answers to these questions make up a worldview through which we process daily life. We could break the questions down further like this:

[1] Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason* (London: Penguin Classics, 2007).

	Philosophical Answer	Practical Answer	Western, Secular Answer[2]
How can we know anything? (How can we know if what we believe is true?)	Epistemology[3]	Knowledge	Scientific truth; "your truth"
What are we? Why are we here? (What is important? How should we spend our time?)	Ontology[4] (Includes theology—nature of God)	Purpose	Total freedom if not harming others
What's wrong with us? (Why are we so unhappy and mean to one another?)	Anthropology[5]	(Un)happiness	Never sacrifice happiness for others
What will put us right? (What is the main thing that will make the world better?)	"Therapy"[6]	Identity	Be true to yourself
How should we live? (How do we determine if something is right or wrong?)	Ethics[7]	Morality	All things boil down to power
What will happen in the future?	Eschatology[8]	Hope	There's a right side of history

In North American and European cities, the Western, secular answers will completely dominate. In global cities outside the West, these secular viewpoints will still be prevalent, along with other, competing worldviews.

[2] These will be treated in some detail in the DNA paper "Evangelism and Community."

[3] Can we know nothing (skepticism)? Can we only know what can be proven scientifically (empiricism)? Or can we know truth because God created our faculties to connect to the world (Christian general revelation)?

[4] Are we here essentially by accident, having evolved so there is nothing but matter and power (materialism)—and therefore totally free to live as we wish? Or are we the emanation of a great All-Soul or immaterial Spirit and therefore here to realize and reunite with it (idealism/Eastern monism)? Or are we the creation of a personal God (monotheism) or of the triune God (Christian theism)?

[5] This is not cultural anthropology but philosophical anthropology—beliefs about human nature. Are we basically good (Rousseau) or selfish (Hobbes)? Are we products of individual choice (individualism or individual identity) or social structure and social location (collectivism or group identity)? Or are we both fallen yet in God's image, both soul and body, and both personal and social because we are made in the image of a Triune God (Christian anthropology)?

[6] This is not psychological therapy. I use the term as sociologist Philip Rieff does—to describe what each worldview says is the way to fix what is wrong with human beings and create good character in them. Do we do it by subjecting our desires to some higher "sacred order" and achieving virtue (traditional identity) or by expressing and achieving our inward desires (modern therapeutic identity)? Or do we find our identity not in any achievement of ours but in Christ's achievement (Christian identity)?

[7] Are morals merely the product of evolution or socially constructed (relativism)? Are morals absolutes we must obey (legalism)? Or is morality based in God's law, yet we are justified by faith alone (Christian ethics)?

[8] Is history bending toward justice and the good (Hegel and Marx; techno-hope); or is it a tale told by an idiot, signifying nothing (Foucault)? Or will death and suffering lead to resurrection and a new creation both on earth and in heaven (Christian hope)?

CRITICISM OF THE TERM "WORLDVIEW"

Over the last several decades, especially in the U.S., the term "worldview" has been used to describe Christianity as a set of beliefs through which we see and interpret the world. The Christian worldview is compared with secularism, scientific materialism, postmodernism, existentialism, Buddhism, Marxism, and so on. Each is similarly described by a list of bullet points outlining a series of beliefs. James Sire's *The Universe Next Door: A Basic Worldview Catalogue* and Jeff Myers and David A. Noebel's *Understanding the Times: A Survey of Competing Worldviews* are examples of this approach.[9]

Criticism of this approach has been growing, however. It is said that people don't ordinarily live according to one coherent worldview but rather they mix elements from various categories together to form a variety of beliefs. Younger adults, for example, often use therapeutic, individualistic answers to define their identity and yet use Marxist, collectivistic answers when talking about justice.[10] This sort of combining is not just true of individuals, but even of schools of thought. For example, is critical race theory a well-structured worldview, or is it a mishmash of ideas from yesterday's Marxism and today's postmodernism?

This tangling of worldviews makes dialoguing with and learning from other worldviews seem impossible. Every worldview is the antithesis of the others, and each has a sharply different starting point. We don't even agree on what the concept of truth is, let alone how to know it. Listing Christianity as yet another worldview may cause people to reduce faith to a belief that Christians are right about everything, and non-Christians are wrong about everything. This can lead to non-Christians turning their nose up at what they believe is little more than arrogance, and it can lead to Christians becoming triumphalist and justifying the rationale for taking over culture and other positions of power. (See the Seven Mountains of Culture movement for an example.)

All this has led many to propose that the term "worldview" be retired. However, if Christian beliefs must influence *every area* of life, we can't do without the concept. The task is, therefore, to think about our worldview in a way that does not fall prey to the problems mentioned above.[11]

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[9] James Sire, *The Universe Next Door: A Basic Worldview Catalogue*, 6th edition (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2020). Jeff Myers and David A. Noebel, *Understanding the Times: A Survey of Competing Worldviews* (Colorado Springs: David C. Cook, 2015).

[10] This is why Christian Smith can speak of American young adults as both "moralistic" and "therapeutic." See his *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers* (New York: Oxford University Press, USA: 2005). Freudian therapy worked to remove feelings of guilt and so tried to "deconstruct" moralism, but today, young adults in the West combine a relativistic, therapeutic attitude toward sexuality and other personal areas of life yet are highly moralistic about matters of social justice.

[11] New works by one of the earliest proponents of the "worldview" term, Herman Bavinck of the Netherlands, are being translated into English and shedding new life on the concept. His 1913 essay *Christian Worldview* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2019), along with his *Philosophy of Revelation and Christian Scholarship* (London: Longmans, Green, 1908) and his nephew J. H. Bavinck's *Personality and Worldview*, translated and edited by James Eglinton (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2023) are all extremely helpful in refining and renewing our understanding of the idea. See also Nancy Pearcey's *Total Truth: Liberating Christianity* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2008) and Al Wolters' *Creation Regained: Biblical Basics for a Reformational Worldview* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2005).

TWO KINDS OF WORLDVIEWS[12]

A "world-mentality." All people have what Dutch pastor, missionary, and theologian Johan Herman Bavinck calls a "world-mentality." A world-mentality is basic, not well-thought-out, and semi-consciously absorbed from a community. It consists of some cardinal beliefs we inherit through our surroundings that serve as a set of glasses through which we interpret the world. Mentalities usually consist of a couple of basic concepts, such as "Be true to yourself," "Determine who you want to be with your choices," "All morality is relative," "Oppressive social structures are behind everything," or "Family and duty are everything." Everything an individual sees is filtered through that lens.

These are often vague conclusions that we have not thoroughly outlined or given words to. They are "caught rather than taught." Many features of a world-mentality are considered such obvious "givens" that they are assumed and almost invisible to the believer. The biggest problem with them is that they are reductionistic. Complex nuances and dimensions of the world become reduced or crumpled up into a few explanatory concepts.

A "world-and-life view." A world-and-life view, by comparison, is complex, well-thought-out, and developed consciously and thoughtfully in community. Developing such a view is a bit like making a map. It is something we form over time. A Christian, for example, might work out a world-and-life view by starting with biblical teaching and asking questions about how to specifically apply it to their lives. How do Christians build families today? How do they make art, conduct politics, grow in character, understand wealth, discover their identity, or overcome emotional problems? As we answer these questions, we are creating a map—working out a world-and-life view.

This means that, in one sense, there is a unified Christian worldview—namely, a set of unique, basic Christian answers to the great philosophical questions about knowledge, reality, human nature, and so on, that have been asked throughout history. But a Christian world-and-life view can take different forms in different times and places, despite being based on this common core of apostolic doctrine. A world-and-life view is the way one responds to the cultural questions and issues of the day in a distinctively Christian manner. In this sense, there is not one single Christian world-and-life view, but many.

J. H. Bavinck points out that there are non-believers who also have worked out a world-and-life view.[13] That is, they take their basic answers to the big questions and seek to develop a consistent view of every area of life. If Christians don't deliberately work out a world-and-life view, they are likely to combine non-Christian world-mentalities with Christian beliefs in contradictory and inconsistent ways. When we do develop a world-and-life view, however, we can use it to live faithfully, serve others, and distinguish the gospel from all other beliefs.

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[12] This distinction is important and explained in J. H. Bavinck's *Personality and Worldview* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2023).

[13] Ibid.

THE PITFALLS OF NON-CHRISTIAN WORLDVIEWS

In Herman Bavinck's *Christian Worldview*, he critiques other worldviews not so much by saying Christianity is the *right* view of the world but that it is the *fullest*.[14] Key to the Christian worldview's distinctiveness is that our God is triune. He is not simply a unity or particularity but equally both at once. The history of human thought pits these against each other ("the one versus the many"), and one side or the other becomes more dominant in every worldview or culture. This leads to simplistic reductions and distortions—to falling into one simplistic pitfall or its opposite.

The Trinity leads to what Bavinck calls an "organic" view of reality, with rich interplay of unity and diversity that can't be reduced to one factor.[15] Put another way, all worldviews not centered on God and his salvation will look to something other than sin to be the problem with the world and something other than God to be the solution. That means alternate worldviews idolize good but fallen things, and demonize fallen but good things. A Christian worldview does not "flatten" life like this but sees it in all its richness and complexity.

In this light, consider again some of the questions worldviews try to answer:

How can we know anything?

- Other worldviews move toward subjectivism or objectivism.
- Christianity says the subject and object are united by God's creation in his image so that we can discern creation.

What are we?

- Other worldviews move toward monism or materialism.
- Christianity says both the spiritual and material exist, as do unified oneness and diversity. Neither is more real than the other.

Who are we?

- Other worldviews move toward individualism or collectivism.
- Christianity says we are both individual and social creatures, products of both our choices and our culture, community, and society.

How can we be happy and free?

- Other worldviews move toward hedonism or stoicism.

[14] Obviously, this is still saying that Christianity is the truest, most correct view of the world. But the distinction is important. To say Christianity is fuller is to show respect for the insights of other worldviews, which, through common grace, can have good insights.

[15] Herman Bavinck, *Christian Worldview* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2019).

- Christianity says we neither love created things less nor love them too much. Rather, we love God more. Freedom comes only then.

How do we know right from wrong?

- Other worldviews move toward abstract absolutism (a sacred order) or relativism.
- Christianity says there is a standard for the good, true, and beautiful, but it is an absolute person: Jesus Christ.

How should we live?

- Other worldviews move toward legalism or antinomianism.
- Christianity says the gospel means we are saved by sheer grace, but that grace enables us to obey God out of love and joy for his sake, not ours. The upside-down kingdom transforms power into a means of service.

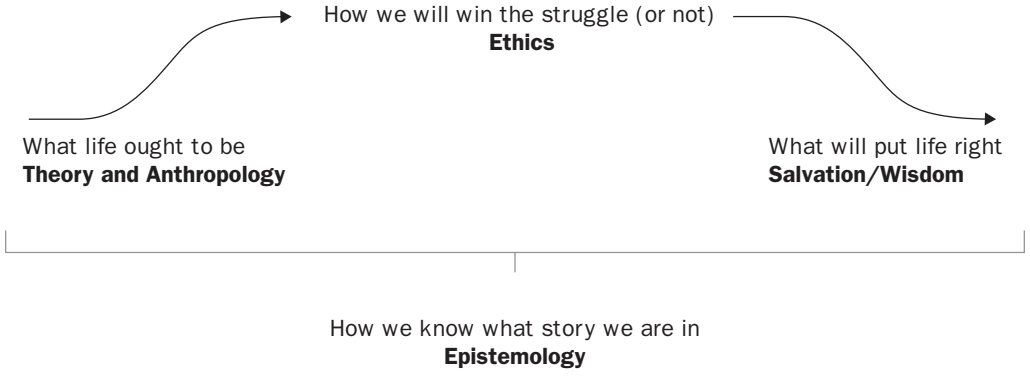
For what can we hope?

- Other worldviews move toward optimistic utopianism or pessimistic declinism.
- Christianity says there is an already-but-not-yet kingdom. Therefore, we maintain ultimate optimism and contemporary realism.

THE NARRATIVE NATURE OF WORLDVIEW

We should not think of a worldview as just a set of bullet-pointed propositions. Humans can only make sense of something if we can put it into a story. Worldviews are expressed in a form of narrative that always revolves around a common template: something has knocked life off-course and kept things from being as they should be. The story then progresses through various dangers and struggles against resistant forces in an effort to put life right again.

The World-Story Arc



In a sense, ontology and anthropology tell us what life ought to be, while salvation and wisdom tell us what the goal of life is and what will put it right. Ethics give us a set of virtues that will bring us success along the way and a set of sins that will only lead to failure. Epistemology tells us how we know that it is this story or narrative form (and not some other) that best captures the central characteristics of human life and action. Here is a diagram of how the traditional parts of worldview help constitute a story arc.

We all see ourselves as someone who fits within a narrative that explains what the world is about—and therefore what our life is about. A secular atheist's story of the world might be, "We are here simply because our planet happened to produce life like us, and when the sun dies, all civilizations will be over forever. Therefore, while we are here, we are free to inject meaning into our lives by creating and pursuing our own values and by making a world in which others are free to do the same." A Buddhist's story might be, "We are all one with each other and the universe, and while we are here, we are to do our best to live in accordance with that truth, not attaching our hearts to material things, and being compassionate with all living things until we shed the illusion of our individuality and merge with the All-Soul."

In his book *Moral, Believing Animals*, Christian Smith argues that humans are "story-shaped"—we must frame our worldview within the context of story so that we may live. He provides a wealth of narratives as examples.[16]

First, there are the competing Western narratives:

- **The American Experiment Narrative:** Once, all nations were governed by the aristocratic few. America is the greatest nation in the world because it allows people self-government. Its establishment freed us from tradition, dictatorships, and hierarchy, creating a place where anyone could live a free and prosperous life through bravery and hard work.
- **The Oppressed People Narrative:** Western, white countries and people groups have oppressed and humiliated others through colonialism and capitalism, as well as values such as feminism, secularism, and eroticism. (There are multiple versions of this, such as a Muslim version, an African version, and an Asian version.)
- **The Capitalist Prosperity Narrative:** For most of history, the world's material production was mired in inefficient and oppressive economic systems. But private property rights, limited government, and the free market brought about a democratization of wealth that has vastly improved social mobility and prosperity.
- **The Progressive Socialism Narrative:** Before capitalism and feudalism, humans lived in communities of equality and freely shared materials. Now, the means of production is in the hands of the few. Socialism can bring back sharing and equality along with prosperity.
- **The Expressive Romantic (or Therapeutic) Narrative:** Before civilization began to control others through guilt, people were free to express their inner desires. They were noble,

[16] Christian Smith, *Moral, Believing Animals: Human Personhood and Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 63–94.

authentic, primal, and unrestrained. Modern people hardly know who they are, but some have shown the way to look inside, find their own truth, and live authentically.

- **The Scientific Enlightenment Narrative:** For most of history, people lived in the darkness of superstition and dealt with the dangers and unknowns of nature with religion. But the Scientific Revolution shows us that all things have a natural, scientific cause and it is only through science that we can know anything and solve our problems.

Then, there are Eastern narratives:

- **The Divine Life and Afterlife Narrative (Dualism):** The world was created out of a battle between gods or forces of good and evil. We humans are born mortal but have seeds of the divine within us, so that if we live moral lives and avoid evil, we can be rewarded with a life of bliss in the next life. If we do not, there is a "dark side" that we may find ourselves in.
- **The Destined Unity with Brahman Narrative (Monism):** From the origin of the universe, the one, all-pervasive Supreme Being (the force of Brahman) has created, preserved, and dissolved the universe in endless cycles. However, all are on a path for ultimate union with the Absolute. Good karma gets people there faster through reincarnation. Bad karma gets people there slowly.

Why is it important to realize that worldviews are not simply a set of philosophical statements but ultimately a form of narrative? If we think of worldviews strictly as a set of propositional statements, we may come to believe that a worldview's formation is mainly an intellectual, conscious, cognitive process of explicit argument and reasoning. That is not true. Worldviews are formed through actual lived experience, which is then assigned meaning through narrative accounts of reality that are brought to us through story (movies, books, plays, tales), music, song, and family and friends sharing anecdotes.

THE COMMUNAL NATURE OF WORLDVIEW

Does everyone have a worldview? Yes. What are our views on the meaning of life, marriage, abortion, politics, money, disciplining children, homosexuality, racism, and sex? All of our responses are based on deeper and more basic beliefs about human beings. Are we only material, or is there a soul? Are we mainly shaped by individual choices or by social forces? Do we discover moral value or create it ourselves? We can't live without working answers to these questions. But that does not mean that most people can *name* their basic beliefs about these things.

Canadian philosopher Charles Taylor insightfully speaks of worldviews as "social imaginaries."[17] A worldview is social (picked up from the people around you in innumerable pre-

[17] J. H. Bavinck's *Personality and Worldview* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2023) made a similar argument many years before Charles Taylor. Bavinck sees worldviews as much an extension of what we learn to love (personality) as how we think.

cognitive ways) and it is an "imaginary"; that is, a worldview consists of what you can plausibly find imaginable (or unimaginable) to believe and do. It is not so much a set of identifiable, discrete ideas argued in a theoretical way as it is a set of images and stories that intuitively make sense of what is happening in the world and how we should relate to it. Ideas, material conditions, relationships, and popular narratives create a picture of the world for us. We should not think people can be argued out of worldviews only theoretically.

It should be added that people in power have a vested interest in shaping what we imagine as possible (or impossible). Media narratives, stories we see on stage, in books, or on screens are forged by "elites"—people with economic, political, and cultural power who create narratives that cement their place in the power structure. There is an enormous, powerful contest going on as to who gets to program our imaginations. We are less shaped by our own choices and more shaped by what the elites (both from the political left and right, as well as other points of the compass) want us to believe. Worldview mapping and counter-catechesis are therefore acts of cultural subversion.

THE FAITH BASIS OF ALL WORLDVIEWS

Many non-religious people want to believe that their views of the world are based on reason while religious people's are based on blind faith. But all knowledge begins with faith. Everyone starts with assumed truths that can't be proven scientifically. The scientist cannot prove her memory or cognitive faculties work without first assuming that they do. She takes by faith that she's not in "The Matrix." There are no non-circular arguments for the case that our perception faculties are reliable. The empiricist who says "I will only believe what I can prove" cannot herself prove the framework of rationality and proof that is being assumed. We can't empirically prove the thesis that we should only believe what we can empirically prove!

The atheist who says there is no proof for God assumes that matter has eternally existed without a cause—something that is certainly unprovable. The secular humanist cannot prove scientifically or logically that all people have equal dignity and equal rights and that to violate them is not just impractical but wrong. He takes it on faith. The religious believer cannot demonstrably prove to every rational person that God exists.

It is crucial for Christians to grasp this. For example, progressives who criticize Christian views of sexuality do so from a standpoint of Western therapeutic individualism—a particular blend of unprovable faith beliefs about human nature, agency and purpose, moral norms, and our relationship to the cosmos. They assume their views are universally true and self-evident, but in many ways, they are the latest form of Western imperialism. Secular people say that their views are objective, universal, and inclusive—but they are none of these things. They are constituent parts of a worldview (technically, a world-mentality) that is based on presupposed assumptions.

Christians who understand these matters should be far less arrogant than secular people who won't acknowledge that they have a worldview. We must realize the limits of what we can prove to others. We must realize that what we say about the gospel will seem almost self-evident to us but not to someone listening from within a different worldview.

All people operate necessarily out of worldviews that are based on non-provable faith assumptions about reality and human nature. This levels the playing field for dialogue in a secular society that is skeptical about religion. The "burden of proof" rests equally on all worldviews, not merely the religious ones.

THE TESTING OF WORLDVIEWS

No one can prove the basis on which their worldview rests. Therefore, we should proceed with humility and respect toward others. But worldviews *can* be compared and examined and recommended to others, and Christians must not neglect to do this. How can this be done?

Look for the idols and demons. Determine what the worldview identifies as the ultimate good and ultimate evil. Every worldview is a story that has an answer to the questions, "What is wrong with the world?" and "What will put us right?" Every worldview identifies something that is the basic problem with the world and something that is the basic solution to the problem. As we explored earlier, non-Christian worldviews, in general, create idols. They look to some good (but fallen) created thing rather than God to be the key to salvation. They also demonize some fallen (but good) created thing rather than human sin to be the main source of the world's ills. By contrast, the Christian worldview identifies the problem with the world as sin and the solution as God's redemption. The only supreme love and hope is the Triune God.

Look for the fullest worldview. Evaluate whether the worldview tends to simplistically reduce complex realities to one dimension. Because non-Christian worldviews naïvely idolize and demonize things that are nuanced—both fallen and good—they tend toward reductionistic pitfalls such as rationalism or subjectivism; legalism or relativism. Scientific materialism reduces everything to the physical (that is, love is just a chemical in your brain that helps you pass on your genes), while pantheism says the physical world is an illusion and reduces everything to the spiritual. By contrast, Christianity knows the world reflects the unity-in-diversity of the Triune God, and that ours is an "organic" world, not one reducible to matter or to spirit, to just ideals or particulars, or to any single, mechanical explanation of things.

Look for the worldview with the greatest explanatory power. Identify the inconsistencies of the worldview with the world we see. If a worldview refuses to admit the existence of things we cannot deny, it is inadequate. For example, at the deepest level we intuitively know and believe that the world we see is real, not something we imagine. We believe there is such a thing as truth. We

believe that some things are right, and some things are wrong. But many secular worldviews deny the existence of those beliefs. Only the Christian worldview can keep heart and head together.

There are at least two ways other worldviews fail to account for the world. The first is that they fail practically. They don't give their supporters the resources for meaning, happiness, purpose, hope, or moral orientation that they need to live. In some cases, proponents live in clear contradiction to professed beliefs. (For example, morality is relative when it comes to sexuality, but racism is always absolutely wrong.) Many secular people become religious in some way when they face suffering and death because their worldview fails to give them practical resources. They seek purpose, identity, freedom, happiness, and hope in ways their worldview doesn't allow.

Other worldviews also fail to account for the world intellectually. Values and concepts are smuggled into a worldview even though the fundamental beliefs of the worldview provide no basis for them (for example, a belief in free will and moral responsibility when a worldview of exclusive materialism does not allow for it).

Test the worldview where it can be assessed empirically. Identify places where the worldview is supported by empirically verifiable reality or contradicts some empirically verifiable reality. Earlier, it was noted that entire worldviews cannot be proven or disproven by empirical investigation, but there may be arguments a worldview uses that are illogical or important features that are testable by rational investigation. For example, Christianity bases claims on the historical reliability of the Gospels and the evidence for the resurrection. So, the evidence for these should be looked at.

Which worldview is the fullest, least reductionistic, and least simplistic? Which one avoids naïve idolatries and harmful demonizations? Which worldview best explains the world we see? Which one "out-narrates" the others? (Worldview A includes the insights of Worldview B, while B cannot access the insights of A.) Which one provides the best resources for purpose, identity, freedom, happiness, and hope—things we cannot live a human life without? Which one has evidence for its claims?

The testing of worldviews is a lot like wearing a suit that's about to rip. If you wear a suit that is far too small for your body, it's uncomfortable at the least—always pinching and pulling you in this place or that. But if you have to make a quick move to catch something falling, it may actually rip. Alternative worldviews to Christianity are like these suits. They fail on their own terms to give what they promise—a knowledge of truth, a stable identity, and a basis for moral norms. At best, they pinch and make you feel restless and uncomfortable. There is a tension between their view of the objective world—what is real—and their subjective experience of human life. But at worst, especially in times of suffering, they can simply rip. They can fail you and make you feel naked and alone in the world. The result is not merely a rational dissonance; that may bother some people but not most. It means that worldview cuts us off from the resources we need to meet our human needs. Only Christianity can give us an account of the objective world that both explains these deepest human needs *and* gives resources to meet them.

When comparing worldviews, ask the following questions:

- What is the idol and supposed savior in this worldview? What is the demon or the problem?
- What is good and right in this worldview?
- Where is it inadequate (reductionistic, non-explanatory, or non-livable)?
- How does Christianity account for what is good in the worldview but is also able to supply what the worldview cannot?

WORLDVIEW AND COMMON GRACE

The doctrine of *common grace* is widely acknowledged as a teaching of the Bible. The idea is that God bestows gifts of wisdom, moral insight, goodness, and beauty across the human race, regardless of religious belief. Isaiah 45:1 speaks of Cyrus, a pagan king, whom God anoints and uses for world leadership. Isaiah 28:23–29 tells us that when a farmer is fruitful, it is God who has taught him to be so. Romans 1 and 2 confirm that there is a primordial knowledge of God that all human beings have. In Romans 2:14–15, Paul says that God's law is written on the heart of every human being—all people have an inward sense of morality, justice, love, the golden rule, and so on. All good and great artistic expressions, skillful farming, effective governments, and scientific advances are God's gifts to the human race (James 1:17). These gifts, however, are "common" in that they do not save the soul, yet without them the world would be an intolerable place to live.

The obvious question is this: how does common grace square with the idea that there is a sharp contrast between Christianity and every other worldview? Romans 1:18–23 speaks to the question. The "truth" about God is "suppressed" (verse 18) by every human being, and every non-Christian worldview helps in that suppression. However, the truth continues to bear down on us all. Verse 20 states that "since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities … have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that people are without excuse." But the verbs *nooumena* ("are being understood") and *kathoratai* ("are being seen") are in the form of present passive participles. The reality of God's nature and our obligations to him are not static, innate ideas or information. They are continually fresh, insistent pressures on the consciousness of every human being. This means that every non-Christian thinker is both fundamentally wrong and yet may say things that are true even if such truths are inconsistent with their worldview. Christians who reflect on the doctrine of common grace are humbled in the process. The doctrine of sin means we Christians are not as wise or as right as our worldview should make us; the doctrine of common grace means non-believers are not as unwise as their wrong worldview should make them.

It is also important to find the balance of learning and critiquing. Calvin strikes the balance of the Reformed tradition when he writes about why we can learn from ancient Greek and Roman thinkers despite their wrong worldviews:

> Let that admirable light of truth shining in them teach us that the mind of man, though fallen and perverted from its wholeness, is nevertheless clothed and ornamented with God's excellent gifts. If we regard the Spirit of God as the sole fountain of truth, we shall neither reject the truth itself, nor despise it where it shall appear unless we wish to dishonor the Spirit of God … . Those men whom Scripture (1 Corinthians 2:14) calls "natural men" were, indeed, sharp and penetrating in their investigation of inferior things. Let us, accordingly, learn by their example how many gifts the Lord left to human nature even after it was despoiled of its true good.[18]

Nevertheless, Calvin also wrote that while it is true that in our "perverted and degenerate nature some sparks still gleam, [the light is nonetheless] choked with dense ignorance, so that it cannot come forth effectively. [The] mind, because of its dullness … betrays how incapable it is of seeking and finding truth."[19]

How can Calvin write such a positive statement about pagan, polytheistic authors and then such a negative one? Are non-believers capable of the truth or not? Yes and no. Calvin is just reading Romans 1 carefully. What Calvin says about ancient pagan authors applies to modern thinkers. We can learn from anyone because of common grace, and we should be willing to humbly listen to non-Christian thinkers because sin clouds our minds, too.[20]

Consider for a moment how the Christian worldview relates to common grace. To hold to both strongly, not pitting them against each other, produces a stance toward the world that both appreciates non-believing thought and art while not compromising our Christian worldview and recognizing the artist's fatally mistaken worldview. American author Nancy Pearcey reflects:

> Our first response to the great works of human culture … should be to celebrate them as reflections of God's own creativity. And even when we analyze where they go wrong, it should be in a spirit of love. ... [Francis] Schaeffer modeled this balanced approach. ... He would appreciate the color and composition of an expressionist painting, or the technical quality of a Bergman film … even while identifying the relativistic or nihilistic worldview it expressed.[21]

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[18] John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2007), 2.2.15.

[19] Ibid., 2.2.12.

[20] For more on this subject, find the section on common grace in Louis Berkhof's *Systematic Theology Complete Edition* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1996), 432–44; see Herman Bavinck's article "Common Grace," https://bavinckinstitute.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/08/Herman-Bavinck-Common-Grace.pdf; and see Richard Mouw's *He Shines in All That's Fair: Culture and Common Grace* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2002).

[21] Nancy Pearcey, *Total Truth: Liberating Christianity from Its Cultural Captivity* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2008), 56–57.

The balanced approach she describes led Pearcey to Christ in the early 1970s while staying at Schaeffer's L'Abri retreat in Switzerland; a balance that is even rarer today than it was then.

Without an understanding of common grace, the world is a confusing place! In the movie *Amadeus*, the composer Antonio Salieri is bewildered and bitter that he, a morally good person, has so little talent, while Mozart (who, in the movie, is a morally despicable person) has obviously received his soaring talent as a gift from God. Salieri's problem is a failure to understand that all good work in the world is a gift of God because it comes from him through the image of God in all of us. God graciously gives out good gifts of wisdom, talent, beauty, and skill—that is, in a completely unmerited way. Like seed, he casts them across the human race in order to enrich, brighten, and preserve the world. But that is not unfair, really. By rights, sin should be making life on earth much more unbearable than it is. One of the main reasons it does not is because of common grace.

Without an understanding of this, Christians will think they should live self-sufficiently. We might feel like we should only go to Christian doctors, work with Christian lawyers, listen only to Christian counselors, or buy only Christian art. Of course, we remember the balance of this doctrine! Every non-believer has serious blindness and is operating out of a false worldview. There is no neutrality. But the fact remains that many of the gifts God has put in the world for us believers as well as for the rest of the human race are found in non-Christians. Mozart was a gift to us whether he was a believer or not (remember James 1:17). As Matthew 5:45 says, "He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous."

Without understanding common grace, Christians may feel no need to study the world and other human cultures in order to get to know God. But we need to appreciate truth and wisdom wherever we find it (Proverbs 6:6).

And, finally, without an understanding of common grace, Christians will have trouble understanding why non-Christians so often exceed them in morality and in wisdom. As mentioned before, the doctrine of sin means that believers are never as good as our right worldview should make us. The doctrine of grace means that unbelievers are never as messed up as their false worldviews should make them. The differences between believers and non-believers across the board are often not striking. One of the reasons is, of course, sin. But the other reason is grace!

WORLDVIEW AND COUNTER-CATECHESIS

By using the word "catechesis," I am not necessarily calling for the use of catechism's actual method of question and answer. (I am a proponent of this method, but that's not my point here.) I use the word "catechesis" to speak of the way churches have instructed and formed Christians who are shaped by the Bible and Christian teaching rather than by the world. The fact is that we have virtually stopped doing catechesis as it was done in the past. How so? It is because we have

forgotten that catechesis was always counter-catechesis.[22] Effective catechesis means presenting biblical truth in a profoundly "worldviewish" way. Biblical doctrine must be presented in such a way that believers are inoculated, as it were, against the dominant non-Christian truths and narratives of the culture.

During the Reformation, there was an explosion of catechesis. New catechisms were written by the hundreds! It is noteworthy that the Protestant catechisms gave less space to the doctrine of the Trinity or of Christ, and far more to the doctrine of salvation (justification and regeneration), to the sacraments, and to the church. Why? Because they were not merely indoctrinating their members with their teaching. They were also inoculating their members against the only real alternative to being a Protestant at the time—being a Catholic. The Protestant catechisms presented biblical doctrine against the Catholic catechisms. Catechisms, when effective, are also counter-catechisms. They do not only construct a worldview; they also dismantle and vaccinate against the dominant alternatives.

The problem is that, as indispensable and necessary as the best of the catechisms still are (Heidelberg, Westminster, and Luther's Short and Large), they are not sufficient. That is because the main alternative to being a Protestant Christian is now, depending on the city in the world, some form of Western secularism (secular humanism, secular anti-humanism, secular mysticism) or some other religion (Islam, Hinduism, African tribal religions, and so forth). These alternative worldviews have very definite catechisms of their own, and while our current instructional modes and catechisms may be biblically accurate, they often do not present the truth in such a way that clearly dismantles alternative narratives and undermines beliefs.

Narratives are beliefs about reality that come to us dozens of times a day or even an hour in ads, tweets, music, stories, narratives, opinion pieces, and more. Secular narratives include those of:

- Identity ("You have to be true to yourself.")
- Freedom ("You should be free to live any way you choose, as long as you don't hurt anyone else.")
- Happiness ("You have to live in the way that makes you most happy; you can't sacrifice that for anyone.")
- Science ("The only things we can know for sure are things objective science proves.")
- Morality ("Everyone has the right to decide what is right and wrong for themselves; no one has the right to tell you what is right or wrong for you.")
- Justice ("Nevertheless, we have a moral obligation to work for freedom, rights, and the good of everyone in the world.")
- History ("History is bending toward scientific advance, increased freedom for everyone, and away from religion.")

[22] I borrow this term from Alan Jacobs. See, Alan Jacobs, "Dare to Make a Daniel," The Homebound Symphony, September 19, 2018, https://blog.ayjay.org/dare-to-make-a-daniel/.

The potential existence of a personal yet absolute Creator makes these narratives incongruous with one another. Some of these narratives can only be true if God exists, and some can only be true if he doesn't. On one hand, Western society says that morality is subjective. If there is no God, this may be true. But if there is an absolute Creator, no one can rightfully decide what is right and wrong for themselves; there needs to be a defined moral order. On the other hand, Western society also says that we have a moral obligation to work for justice. If God is real, this would be true. But if there is *no* absolute Creator, there is no reason to think that we have a moral obligation to work for the good of others.

Many biblical teachings and truths undermine, weaken, or balance out all these narratives, and yet our current instruction does not show this to disciples. The world's catechism is not made visible to Christians, called out, refuted, or re-narrated. We need the "you've heard it said" approach that Jesus employed during his Sermon on the Mount, where he not only told us the truth ("But I tell you"), but did it in contrast to what the authorities of the day were saying ("You have heard that it was said").

In our counter-catechesis, each of the basic narratives of the secular catechism will have to be identified and stated with examples from modern culture. They will have to be affirmed in part, because there is often something in them that represents a distortion or idolatrous imbalance of something true. And they will have to be subverted, critiqued, and shown to be fulfilled in their best form only in Christ.

Catechisms should shape, change, and renew not only our thinking but also our living and actions. The Bible always balances thinking and practicing. Catechesis should focus on both. Who writes the catechisms? As noted, in every city of the world, the alternative worldviews to Christianity will be different. So, every church should write their own catechism (as during the Reformation). But church leaders (also as during the Reformation) can also come together in a country or region to develop agreed-upon catechisms to be used in their time and place.

Below is a tentative outline of an example:

Counter-Catechesis

The World's Answer "You have heard that it was said …"	The Question	The Gospel's Answer "But I tell you …"
"We are here to live in any way that is meaningful to us, so long as it doesn't harm others." (Underlying commitments: freedom and individualism)	**Why are we here?** ⟷	**"We are here to be God's own children and enjoy him."** (Underlying commitments: creation by the Triune God in the image of God)
"Some people stop us from doing whatever makes us happy. They also withhold material things that will bring us happiness." (Underlying commitments: happiness and materialism)	**What's wrong with us?** ⟷	**"The sin that separates us from God and ruins our relationships."** (Underlying commitments: the Fall and the doctrine of sin)
"The ideas of a sacred law and moral absolutes." (Underlying commitments: emotivism and pragmatism)	**What will *not* put us right?** ⟷	**"Perfect obedience to God's law, or a disregard for it entirely."** (Underlying commitments: the goodness of God's law and an aversion to its misuses: legalism and antinomianism)
"Being true to ourselves by listening to our deepest desires and feelings." (Underlying commitments: expressivism, romanticism, self-achievement, and acceptance)	**What *will* put us right?** ⟷	**"Christ's achievement of our salvation, God's love, and God's acceptance."** (Underlying commitments: Christ's accomplishment of redemption on the cross, resurrection from the grave, and ascension into God's kingdom)
"Power. Because all claims about moral truths are attempts to seize power, our group must take power by force in order to stop them." (Underlying commitments: socialism, identity politics, or nationalism)	***How* can we be put right?** ⟷	**"Though faith in Christ brings us personal salvation, we can improve our communities through loving service."** (Underlying commitments: the upside-down nature of the kingdom, the examples of Christ and the early church)
"Science and utilitarian reason. The solutions to our problems must come from science and our innermost feelings, not religion." (Underlying commitments: rationalism, scientism, and emotivism)	**How do we know all of these answers?** ⟷	**"Revelation provided by God and his Word, as well as reason within the bounds of faith."** (Underlying commitments: general and special revelation, biblical inerrancy)
"We live with the hope that our future is moving toward freedom and away from religion." (Underlying commitments: historicism and progressivism)	**How will we live this?** ⟷	**"We live with hope in the knowledge that God controls our future, and that we can be a foretaste of his future kingdom on earth."** (Underlying commitments: faith in God's power, the already-but-not-yet nature of his kingdom)

ADDITIONAL READING RECOMMENDED BY CITY TO CITY

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PART SIX

Biblical High Theory

In *How to Reach the West Again*, I mention the importance of developing a biblical, Christian "high theory," or a way to understand and appreciatively critique culture from a gospel-based worldview.[1] In other words, before we can contextualize the gospel, we must first use the gospel to interpret and analyze the culture.

WHAT IS HIGH THEORY?

A theory is a working explanation of some phenomenon or a set of principles on which a set of activities is based. In both cases, the theory accounts for what happens. A high theory, or a "theory of theories," aims to explain an entire society in such a way that its hidden aspects, functions, and goals are exposed. It aims to show what's *really* going on. The thesis of this paper is that the Bible provides such a theory for explaining any culture.

MODERN CRITICAL THEORY

Since the middle of the twentieth century, especially since the 1990s, a host of high theories, such as literary theory, feminist theory, critical race theory, and queer theory have sought to unmask and weaken what they identify as the oppressive structures of Western society. These theories are based on a variety of anthropologies, or accounts of human nature. One influence is Freudian theory, which asserts that traditional sexual ethics are a source of oppression. Another is French postmodernism, which believes that most of society's customs, and even its moral claims, are ways to secretly accrue power. Still another influence is Marxism, which states that the causes of our problems are material and structuralist rather than the result of our individual choices or culture. Many of today's social theories are mixtures (often incoherent ones) of all three strands of thought and are collectively referred to as "critical theory."

But there is an older and broader sense of the term. In the modern era, the first thinker to put forth critical theories was Immanuel Kant in his critique of the Enlightenment's views of pure reason (metaphysics) and of practical reason (ethics) and of judgment (aesthetics). In this older sense, a critical or high theory is not necessarily Freudian, postmodern, or Marxist. It simply a means to make visible the underlying patterns and narratives of a culture, so that value can be assigned to some and critique to others.

[1] Timothy Keller, *How to Reach the West Again: Six Essential Elements of a Missionary Encounter* (Redeemer City to City, 2020), 14–16.

CULTURAL FIGURES

Scholar Christopher Watkin uses the term "figures" to describe cultural patterns and narratives that are valued and foregrounded—things that culture counts as sensible, true discourse. The values are expressed through the following:

- **Language and stories:** What's wrong with the world and what will put it right? Concepts such as "boys will be boys" or "always follow your heart" accompany famous stories that convey a culture's values.
- **A depiction of reality-structure, or the view of the universe:** For example, the Western view of the universe as an "immanent frame" means there is no God or transcendent reality outside of the immanent material world, as opposed to a traditional African worldview of a "porous frame," in which the spiritual intersects with the material world in numerous ways.
- **Habitual behavior:** These are routine things that people do that shape values. For example, going out on dates or other social events on weekend evenings was a new behavior introduced in cities at the turn of the twentieth century that reflected a change in the status of the family and the promotion of public amusement and entertainment.
- **Personal and corporate relationships:** This relates to whether the needs of the individual or the group are more prominent. The structure of institutions conveys a culture's values, as does its relationship to authority.
- **Arrangements and divisions of time and space:** For example, the Western idea of progress is generally one-way, looking chronologically forward and rarely back. The definition of punctuality differs in various cultures and reflects values. In terms of space, the way we define public and private areas varies in different cultures. For example, poorer people often live "around" their homes (making frequent excursions to the outside community), while wealthier people live *in* their homes (spending most of their time inside the house). The combination of these things leads to a worldview and "social imaginary"[2]—a sense of ourselves and the world around us. They express what Watkin calls a *figuration totale* of a particular cultural moment.[3]

BIBLICAL PATTERNS AND NARRATIVES

The Bible has its own patterns and narratives that enable us to analyze a culture at the deepest level. It allows us to critique the culture (and the alternative critiques of it!) *and* yet appreciate it in a way the current critical theories do not. As a result, Christians—especially Christian scholars across the academic disciplines—need to use the Bible to reveal, understand, and critique the deep-seated structures of a culture. Then, ministers and lay leaders can use these insights as they contextualize, evangelize, pursue justice, form disciples, and serve cities.

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[2] This term comes from Charles Taylor.

[3] The material in the early sections of this article is influenced by Watkin's lecture on "Developing a Biblical Critical Theory" found at https://www.thinkingthroughthebible.com/developing-a-biblical-critical-theory (accessed March 4, 2023).

The Bible provides illuminating insight to the goals and questions of the world's theories. For example, no one has a full understanding of the unity-in-diversity that Western society seeks. Yet the Bible clearly shows that God exemplifies unity-in-diversity in the Holy Trinity and that his kingdom will one day experience a similar unity-in-diversity. Each critical theory also posits a reason as to why humanity seems to be in a broken and unsatisfied state. But none has the multifaceted understanding of human nature that the Bible has, with its dimensions of Creation, Fall, redemption, restoration, *imago Dei*, sin, and grace. Anything a secular critical theory attempts to analyze in a culture, the Bible can analyze better. Of course, Christians cannot fully comprehend the nature of the Trinity or human nature, either. Therefore, Christians are not always more insightful than secular thinkers. As was said in the article "Grace," we must learn from everyone and let that learning drive us back into the Bible.

THE DANGERS OF A CHRISTIAN HIGH THEORY

There are at least three dangers attendant to developing a Christian high theory.

First, there is the danger that any use of the terms "critical theory," "social theory," or even "high theory" by Christians will simply be read as an endorsement of some prominent postmodern secular theory. Indeed, it may be that Christians seeking to establish a biblical social theory will be too little influenced by deep biblical study and more influenced by the reigning critical theories.

There is also an opposite danger. As discussed in the article "Worldview," the notion of common grace allows Christians to learn from other theories without being captured by them. But there is usually a great temptation for Christian theoreticians to be too negative toward a culture and not appreciative enough of the common grace therein. In this case, any and all thinking outside of the Christian high theory would be discarded outright instead of properly evaluated.

The third danger is that the development of a Christian high theory will indeed be too "high" conceptually and not practical enough for practitioners. The best high theory of Western culture written in the last generation by Jews and Catholics (Charles Taylor, Alasdair MacIntyre, Philip Rieff) is inaccessible for most Christian leaders. A Christian high theory would run the risk of being confined to abstraction or academics instead of being lived out by everyday people.

THE NEED FOR A CHRISTIAN HIGH THEORY

Despite these dangers, we *need* a Christian high theory. Why? First, because it helps us escape cultural captivity. Culture seeks to be invisible—to be "just the way things are." We often don't realize that our culture influences us far more than the Bible does. We need to use biblical teaching to see into our culture and make sure it is not blinding or capturing us where it should not.

Augustine's *City of God* is a massive, brilliant, history-changing example of the development and deployment of a biblical high theory. The problem Augustine addressed was the fall of

Rome to barbarian invaders. Prior to the attack, the Roman government finally began to support Christianity, leading many to consider Rome as the City of God. But when Rome fell, society began to believe that Christianity had failed. Augustine pointed out that no earthly city, social order, or political machine can be identified as the kingdom or City of God. (Any church that begins to identify too much with a nation or political order commits idolatry.)

In his book, Augustine uses biblical teaching about the kingdom of God to critique Roman culture. First, he examines the classic Greco-Roman culture's story about itself. It speaks of a polytheistic universe in which deities struggle against one another, a narrative that Augustine says is contradictory, self-defeating, and unable to produce the peaceful and just society Rome aspires to be. In the second part, he lays out the biblical story of the world, in which there are two "cities"—the kingdom of man and the kingdom of God—and how through the work of Christ the kingdom of God will eventually redeem the world. This biblical story, Augustine argues, satisfies our deepest desires and makes sense of our world and ourselves.

A second reason we need a Christian high theory is to guide our cultural engagement and contextualization. We need a way to analyze what is good in a culture, what is wrong or evil, and what is "indifferent" (*adiaphora*). Without such distinctions, Christians adopt stances to the culture that are too hostile, too fearful, or too friendly. In all cases, there is no nuance—just total rejection or open-armed acceptance. A good example of this is the campaign by some conservative Christians to brand anything that critiques systemic racism in U.S. culture as communist critical theory. On the other hand, there *is* a need for Christians to be able to critique, in a nuanced way, any critical theory based on secular assumptions about human nature without wholly embracing it. Secular critical theories cannot critique themselves—they rest on assumptions of faith that they assume are true in order to perform criticism. Only the Bible can be trusted to be a standard by which to criticize all critical theories.

To criticize a theory means to identify the several historical strands in it, to make visible its basic ontological and anthropological assumptions, and to appreciatively critique it with biblical teaching. At the same time, we must let secular critical theories provoke us to a better reading of Scripture. For example, could reading Foucault help us see something we hadn't seen and yet something that Scripture points to, as well? Yes. Without using the Bible in a social-theoretical way, we cannot do this kind of analysis of culture and self.[4]

Finally, a Christian high theory can actually be a witness in itself, a testimony to the richness of the Bible and the gospel. It shows that Scripture's "figures"—its narratives and patterns—can bring understanding of any culture. It can shine a light on our path (as Psalm 119:105 says), helping Christians see the underpinnings and background narratives of their own culture so they are not blinded and captured by it, while showing us the common grace in other cultures so we are not thoughtless, cultural chauvinists or racists. Christian high theory can show how the Bible can indeed "take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ" (2 Corinthians 10:5).

[4] See the DNA paper "Cultural Engagement."

RAW MATERIAL FOR A CHRISTIAN HIGH THEORY

To develop a Christian high theory, we must first base it on the biblical narrative. Second, we must analyze the narratives of culture in order to see how the people around us think and how the biblical narrative can prove a fulfilling alternative to their existing belief systems.

THE BIBLICAL NARRATIVE

Here is a brief, partial list of the patterns and narratives of the Bible that should be used for cultural critique and understanding:

In the beginning, God

- God is both infinite and absolute yet personal.
- The Holy Trinity is both one and three.

Creation

- The material world was created *ex nihilo* ("out of nothing"). It is all creationally good but dependent upon God (yet not identical with him).
- Humanity is made in the image of God and made to reflect him. We must always worship something.
- We can discover God's truth through general revelation and nature itself.

The Fall

- Sin has disordered our heart's loves. Our mind, will, and emotions are all affected by sin.
- The Flood, the confusion of languages at Babel, and other incidents show God's judgments in this world.
- God relates to people through covenants and keeps his promises.
- We can discover God's truth through special revelation and Scripture.

Israel

- The Exodus displays liberation from oppression. In contrast to serving humans, serving God leads to true freedom.
- The covenant law is a gift for relationship *after* salvation, not a means of salvation.
- False loves and idolatry are the foundational sin underneath other sins.
- The tabernacle and temple show that atonement for sin is the basis of a relationship with God.

- The Prophets emphasize the covenant, highlighting its blessings and curses when the Israelites fall into idolatry.
- The concept of exile shows the relationship of the believing community to the society around it.
- Proverbs of wisdom help us order our lives and relationships better than we would otherwise.

Jesus

- Christ's incarnation shows us that the ideal has become real.
- The nature of discipleship means the first shall be last. We must lose our life to find our life.
- The sum of the law and the key to the heart is love.
- Jesus triumphs through weakness and self-sacrifice, as seen in his sacrifice on the cross, atonement for our sins, and rising from the grave.
- We can be personally united with Christ. A relationship with Christ means we can find justification, adoption, and sanctification in him.

The church and the future

- The people of God, the body of Christ, form a community that enjoys the fellowship of the Holy Spirit.
- God's future kingdom is already here partially, but not yet fully here.
- There will be a final judgment that features a righting of wrongs, a renewal of all things, and the glorification of God.

It is important to consider how these biblical principles continue to affect us now—and what that means for our everyday lives. Christopher Watkin says that a Christian theory is not the "what" of the Bible (its doctrine) nor the "why" (apologetics for why we believe it). Instead, it asks the question, "So what?" We believe in the Trinity. What does that mean for us? What does that mean in our politics or relationships with one another? How does it affect the relationship between reason and feeling, or the relationship between power and love? But to answer questions like these, we must first understand how people in our culture already function.

THE CULTURAL NARRATIVE

What is the culture that your ministry is addressing? That is a judgment call that ministry leaders must make, and the answer will likely be somewhat complex. We may even have to separate them into two categories—one for a dominant culture and one for a subculture or alternate culture.

For example, during my time as pastor of Redeemer Presbyterian Church in New York City, our congregation had a large number of Asian Americans, most of whom were second-generation individuals who thought in English. But to understand them, I needed to understand both the dominant, individualistic, Western culture of the U.S. *and* the collectivistic and traditional Korean and Chinese cultures. Most of the younger Asian members had one foot in both of these worlds. The variations on this theme are innumerable. African Americans and Hispanics of various national groups all tend to coexist in two cultural worlds as well. Then, there are generations to consider—each new generation in any culture tends to be something of its own subculture. In Asia, Latin America, Africa, and the Middle East, older people are finding that younger generations are more Westernized, especially in urban areas.

QUESTIONS TO ASK WHEN ANALYZING CULTURE

When it comes to analyzing culture, where do we start? We must first look at the people we are trying to reach and seek to understand the culture that has formed them. Below, I'll offer a series of questions that may be helpful in assessing the inner workings of a cultural framework.

REALITY

What is "real" in this universe? To know this, a culture must ask itself a series of questions. For one, it faces the dichotomy of the one and the many: are universals or particulars more real? Is the diversity of the world an illusion, meaning that reality is unchanging? If so, this means that we can and must insist on conformity and unity (Eastern cultures). Or are the unities and certainties of the world an illusion, meaning reality is an ever-changing flux? If so, this means that there is never common ground and that we should allow individual freedom for everything (Western cultures).

It also faces the dichotomy of superstition versus disenchantment. Is the world a rather frightening place of good and evil supernatural forces (traditional folk religions), or is it a disenchanted world in which there is no supernaturality and everything has a scientific explanation (secular scientism)?

What about nature? Is it sacred and always best? Must we refrain from changing nature in any way at all? Or are we to see nature as a human environment that must be processed in a way that enhances human comfort and economic prosperity?

KNOWLEDGE

How can we know or be certain of anything? Is there a stable, ordered reality around us that we can truly see, touch, smell, taste, and hear? Are we able to say things about reality that are absolutely true? Or is it the case that there is no stable, ordered reality and that we cannot see reality as

it is, only as it appears to us? Do our concepts and language therefore create a reality for us instead of reflecting it? What is the connection between object (the reality) and subject (the knower)?

Is science alone able to give us objective, certain knowledge? Does the culture believe that it can only give us facts—what *is*—and not values—what *ought* to be? Are facts totally objective while values are wholly subjective, with no way to judge one better than the other?

HUMAN NATURE AND SOCIETY

What are human beings, and what is wrong with us? Are human beings basically good people ruined by outside forces (see below) or are they basically selfish and cruel, needing to be strongly ruled? Is nature good and it is culture that ruins us (as Rousseau and Marx believe)? Or is nature wild and violent and something to be contained by culture and subjugated to human needs (as Hobbes would say)?

How do we grade human life? What gives a person value? Do we have inalienable rights? If so—what factor makes this true? Is it rationality that makes us valuable (à la Locke), or is it our ability to make free choices (à la Rousseau)? Or perhaps it's the division of labor and the ability to produce, as Adam Smith says?[5] Or it could be Heidegger's ability to ask, "Who and what am I?" Given that each of these ideas views less rational or productive people as less valuable, how can we avoid grading people in terms of value?

How do we view the dichotomy between individualism and collectivism? Are relationships to be freely chosen and conducted provisionally on a cost-benefit basis, or are relationships to be prescribed by society and communities, and adhered to no matter what? Are the interests of the individual or the interests of the group more important?

ETHICS AND SOLUTIONS

Something is wrong with us, but what will put us right? Before we move on to subsequent questions, let me give you an example of one answer by highlighting the Western culture's emancipation narrative (perhaps the main narrative it holds). There are many versions. Science emancipates us from superstition and enslavement to natural limitations. Radical politics can emancipate us from slavery to oppressive capitalism, racism, sexism, and homophobia. Small government and populist politics can emancipate us from slavery to an oppressive state and regulation. In general, modern versions of the narrative look for negative freedom only—freedom *from*. It is not freedom to serve something liberating, as in the Israelites' liberation from Egypt to serve God. It is pure detachment, and this leads to autonomous "buffered selves" that erode relationships, institutions, and community—all things that require the surrender of our independence.[6]

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[5] Adam Smith and Ernest Belfort Bax, *An Inquiry Into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations* (London: G. Bell & Sons, 1896).

[6] Charles Taylor, "A Secular Age: Buffered and Porous Selves," *The Immanent Frame: Secularism, Religion, and the Public Sphere*, https://tif.ssrc.org/2008/09/02/buffered-and-porous-selves/ (accessed April 10, 2023).

What is the role of morality in fixing ourselves? Is it socially constructed or the mere product of evolution? Is there objective morality? Is the right thing just the greatest good for the greatest number of people (a pragmatist or utilitarian point of view)? If so, would the majority of a society be allowed to enslave a minority if it serves to create a "greater good" for the enslavers? If not, then why not?

The problem of identity is an increasingly popular point of discussion. Is identity mainly an individual concept or mainly a group concept? Is our identity primarily developed internally or externally? Are we first and foremost self-created individuals that regard sexuality as the highest qualifier for authentic identity, as therapeutic models suggest? Or are we society-created, socially assigned members of a class, ethnic group, or sex? Can a man simply claim to be a woman? (Western culture says "yes" based on the therapeutic model of identity being individually created.) Can a white person simply claim to be a Black person? (Western culture says "no" based on the Marxist understanding of identity being group-based and socially created.)

Is work something we do in order to engage in leisure? Or is rest something we do in preparation to do more work? Do we live to work or work to live? Is work a way to get an identity and satisfaction or just a way to put food on the table? What is the meaning of work? Is white collar or intellectual work of greater worth and more humanizing than manual, blue collar work?[7]

A note on alternate cultures: Alternate cultures within a society can themselves be good resources for critiquing the dominant culture. Dominant cultures tend to form identities through alterity—difference—by saying, "We are good because we are not like those other people." The "others" are usually smaller alternate communities and cultures within the dominant one. But even alternate human cultures tend to use alterity: "We are good because we are different from these domineering groups." This approach is instilled in every human heart (Luke 18:10–12) and is part of our universal sinful desire for self-salvation. The gospel offers an identity not based on alterity, and so it gives us a way to critique every culture. We were radically "other" to God, but he overcame that otherness and embraced us with his grace (Ephesians 2:12–13).

THE PRACTICE OF HIGH THEORY

A Christian high theory takes each part of biblical teaching and asks the "so what?" question mentioned earlier: "What does *this* item on the biblical list say to the items on the cultural lists?" How does the idea of covenant or the pattern of the first being last shape our worldview? How does the biblical pattern of liberation from oppression—the Exodus—interrogate and correct the Western idea of oppression and liberation? How does the cosmic structure of God's kingdom, which has already invaded the immanent earthly realm but has not yet fully transformed it, correct both the most optimistic and most pessimistic modern views of history? How does the doctrine of the

[7] These questions on cultural patterns and narratives take inspiration from resources listed in the accompanying index at the end of the article.

Trinity, which refuses to make either oneness or manyness more fundamental, provide a different framework than either the individualism of capitalism or the collectivism of socialism? How does the absolute, yet relational, personality of God affect questions on the meaning of human life? How does it interrogate and guide our use of technology and our understanding of work?

Let's use a set of general, postmodern Western beliefs as a case study.[8] Every one of the cultural figures listed below is a major source of difficulty, conflict, and fragmentation in this culture. Because every non-Christian worldview creates idols, it also creates binaries and flat reductions when trying to solve these problems. In contrast, the Bible speaks powerfully in arguments, narratives, and changed identities that answer these problems and offer nuanced alternatives to binary options.

Biblical Narratives	Western Beliefs	Problems and Consequences
God	The "immanent frame" (deism or scientism): "I'm spiritual, not religious."	All of life is disenchanted.
The Trinity	Unity and diversity (pluralism): "No cultural value is better than any other."	All unity is elusive. We are fragmented groups of people.
The Exodus	Emancipation and liberation (negative freedom): "I am free to live any way I wish, as long as I don't harm others."	All of our loyalties are disintegrating.
Union with Christ	Identity (individual and group identities clash): "Always be true to yourself, but you're also socially constructed."	All of our identities are fragile, confused, or stifling.
Covenant	Relationships (consumer or covenant?): "Keep your options open, and don't commit unless it fulfills you. But community is also important."	All of our relationships are transactional.
Love and Idolatry	Happiness (hedonism or stoicism): "No one may keep you from what makes you happy."	Everything in which we seek fulfillment is inevitably disappointing.

[8] I offer a case study on Western culture in particular because it is so strong and pervasive in so many places—even outside of the West, due to its encroachment through social media, corporate behavior, and the academy. Western cultures in Europe, the U.S., Canada, and Australia all have notable differences, of course, but they are far more alike than dissimilar.

Biblical Narratives	Western Beliefs	Problems and Consequences
Law and Gospel	Morality (utilitarianism and emotivism): "You have to determine what is right or wrong, but injustice is always wrong."	All values are relative, and there are insufficient moral sources for moral ideals.
Cross and Justice	Power (desire for power, resentment, relativism): "Every claim about morals or facts is a power move."	Every revolution is nothing but a move to accrue power.
Truth and Revelation	Truth (instrumental reason yet constructivism): "Only science can give us facts, but facts are constructed."	All claims about truth have instrumental costs and benefits behind them.
Judgment and Glory	Hope (waning faith in progress; no meaning in suffering): "We create our own purpose, but history is bending toward progress."	All of our hopes in human progress ultimately fail.

The goal of a biblical high theory is to use the first column to respond to the second and solve the problems in the third. How?

DIAGONALIZATION

The central application of a biblical high theory is diagonalization. Do the biblical narratives merely judge the cultural ones as good or bad? No. They "diagonalize" them, to use Christopher Watkin's intriguing phrase. They interact with them, both critiquing the cultural patterns in a nuanced, profound way (not just affirming or rejecting) and offering a positive, biblical social theory going forward.

As we have said here and in other articles, every non-Christian worldview makes a demon out of some good, created thing to explain what is wrong with life. It also makes an idol out of some limited, fallen thing to explain what will save us. This leads to reductionism, contradictions, and irreconcilable binaries in the cultures where the worldview dominates. Watkin argues that Christianity diagonalizes the binaries. "To diagonalize a choice," he says, "is to refuse the two (or more) alternatives it offers and elaborate a position that is neither reducible nor utterly unrelated to them."[9] Put another way, it fully critiques both options yet fulfills the best aspirations of both without merely combining them or borrowing

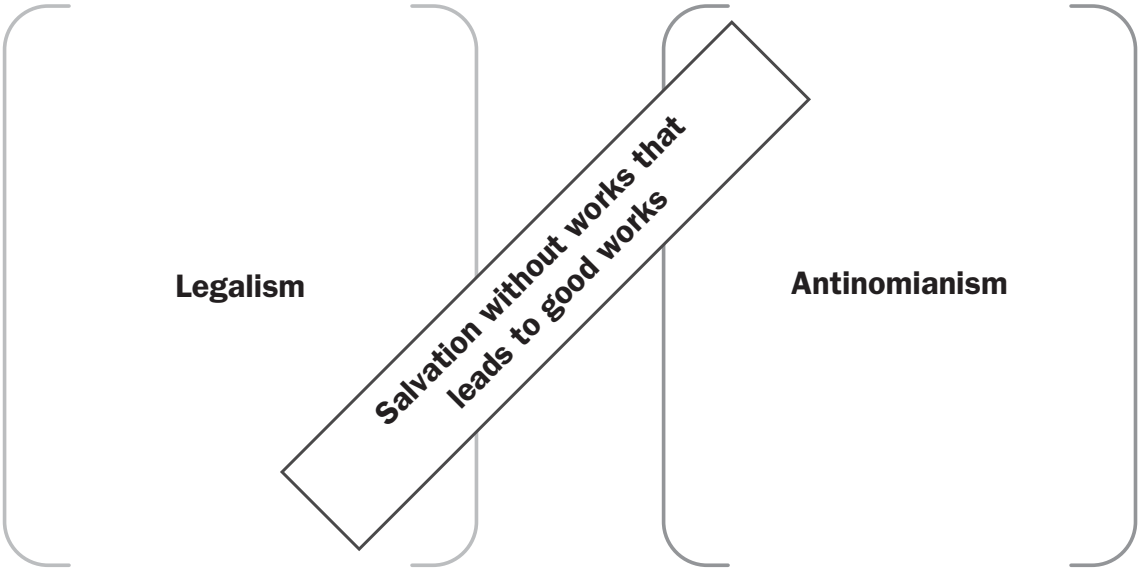
[9] Christopher Watkin, *Thinking Through Creation: Genesis 1 and 2 as Tools of Cultural Critique* (Philipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2017), 28.

from them. Though diagonalization is Watkin's term, he argues that it is merely his version of a dynamic operation—to use Christian doctrine to appreciate, critique, and redirect cultural patterns into a different social theory—that many other thinkers argue for and do using their own phraseology. He cites Paul Ricoeur, C. S. Lewis, John Stott, John Millbank, Herman Bavinck, and St. Augustine as examples.[10]

DIAGONALIZATION INSIDE CHRISTIAN THEOLOGY

Christian doctrine is full of diagonalization. It does not feature modalism nor tritheism but the Trinity. It does not include Ebionism nor Docetism but the hypostatic union. It is not legalist nor antinomian but advocates justification by faith alone. It does not emphasize contingency nor determinism but compatibilism. In each case, the true doctrine neither ignores nor combines the two alternatives. It does not occupy some place on a spectrum between the two alternatives. It provides a new formulation *off* the spectrum—yet one that does not ignore the aspirations or concerns of the alternatives.

For example:



In Romans, Paul critiques both legalists (those who sought to save themselves by their righteousness [9:31]) and antinomians (those who lived without God and as they saw fit [1:18 and onward]). Is the gospel a halfway point, a moderate middle way between the two alternatives? Not at all. Legalists are concerned about moral compromise and any failure to obey God's moral law. Antinomians are concerned about self-righteousness, cultural rigidity, and a lack of loving motivation from inside the heart. The gospel, of course, radically critiques both positions and fulfills

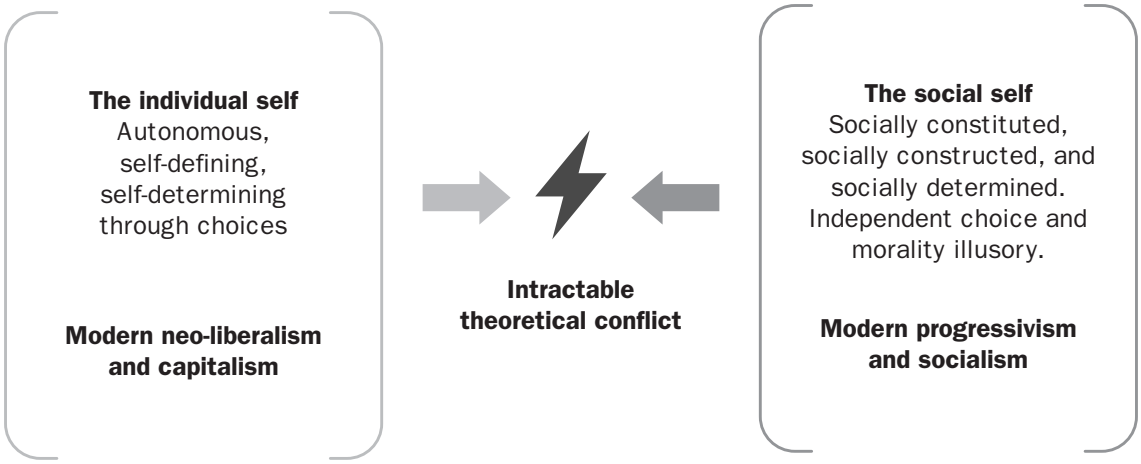
[10] Christopher Watkin, *Biblical Critical Theory: How the Bible's Unfolding Story Makes Sense of Modern Life and Culture* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Academic, 2022), 40. Diagonalization is always subversive fulfillment, but the latter is not always the former—because diagonalization is between alternatives.

their concerns better than the positions can themselves. It says we are saved by faith alone but not by a faith that remains alone. That is, we are saved by faith alone, not by a good life. But true, saving faith always inevitably results in a changed life with new motivation to obey God's law. In short, the Bible "diagonalizes" alternatives. It does not find a midpoint on the spectrum between them. It is a position off of it.

Whether we call it "diagonalization" or not, the principle is seen in the Bible. When Joshua saw an armed man near Jericho, he asked him, "Are you for us or for our enemies?" It was the angel of the Lord, and his answer was striking: "Neither." In fact, many translations record the angel simply saying, "No." No? No, to which one? The angel was actually communicating that the effort to put God on a spectrum of human allegiances and categories doesn't work. Then, the angel went on to say that "as commander of the army of the LORD I have now come." God overturns Joshua's categories and redirects him into a new category. He was not here to serve them, their enemies, nor any other human power. The real question was if *they* were going to serve God. Joshua responds, "What message does my LORD have for his servant?" (Joshua 5:13–14).

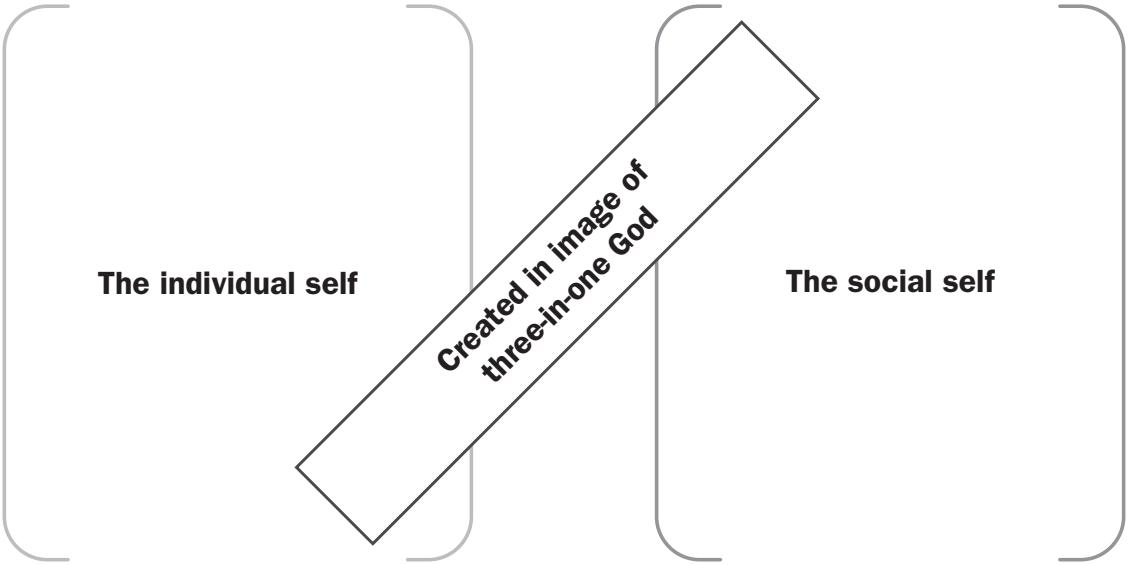
DIAGONALIZATION FOR ANALYZING AND ANSWERING CULTURE

Let's start with the example of the individual and the social self.[11] In the current cultural climate of the West, the polarization between the political Left and Right is deep and complex, but at the heart of it is an intractable theoretical conflict between those who believe that human beings are the results of their own choices and those who believe they are the result of social structures.



[11] Christian Smith, *To Flourish or Destruct: A Personalist Theory of Human Goods, Motivations, Failure, and Evil*, 1st edition (Chicago: University of Chicago, 2015), 57.

The Bible diagonalizes the two positions. This is evident throughout its ethics and wisdom literature, where we see an amazing balance between the individual and community. And yet there is a deeper and more profound way in which the Bible says we should not take one or the other, nor should we take neither, nor should we take both in combination. We are made in the image of a Triune God who is not mostly one nor three but both equally. And so we become individual selves not in spite of being in community but through it.[12] We receive our most stable individual identity not by separating from God, but through union with Christ.



Here's another example, this time about alterity, violence, and love.[13] Jacques Derrida's phrase "every other is wholly other"[14] means that everything you try to say about "the other"—someone unlike you—is necessarily violent, since you are reducing them or totalizing their unique difference (alterity) by forcing it into the general categories of your language and concepts. Put another way, I must never assume anyone is like me in any way because that reduces the other person's differences to my idea of them. This is a totalitarian move. I must let the other speak and must not think I understand them.

Are Derrida and his followers completely wrong? No. Think of one woman who looks at another and thinks, "She's Jewish, so I bet she's really careful with her money." This is indeed a stereotype that flattens and reduces a person's individuality in order to dismiss or lessen them. And the insistence that we be "colorblind"—that we stress that everyone is the same underneath—can

[12] See chapters IV and V in Charles Taylor, *The Ethics of Authenticity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2018).

[13] This example comes from Watkin, *Biblical Critical Theory*, 74.

[14] "tout autre est tout autre," cf. Jacques Derrida, *The Gift of Death*, trans. David Wills (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1999), 77–78.

lead to an insistence that minority groups assimilate and become like the dominant group in order to be accepted.

But this rightful concern has led (as usual) to an extreme, one in which there are no objective truths we all share, one in which all we can do is let the other speak out of their lived experience and express themselves any way they wish, and one in which there can never be any true unity, forgiveness, and reconciliation in order to move forward. And, in the end, the insistence that any effort to create common ground is "violent" is self-defeating. If I can never understand you since you are an other, what's the purpose of listening to you speak to me? This means, ironically, that the other is left without a real identity that I can grasp. Worst of all, there is no possibility of relational intimacy. I can anxiously and remotely honor the other in an effort not to offend, but I cannot embrace them or have true companionship with them.

Derrida cannot imagine an absolute truth that does not crush people. But Jesus is an absolute being who has become personal, one who is both truth and love. "In order to be absolute and universal [Jesus] does not need to be cold and abstract; in order to be personal he doesn't need to lose his absoluteness."[15] Christians have both a model in Christ and a humbling power within (the humble boldness and the already-but-not-yet nature of the gospel) that enables us to listen to the other, yet still respond to them so as to seek relationship and embrace.

Watkin says:

> The relationships of the Trinity provide tools that help us to understand sameness and difference in a way that provides for distinctness, distance, and honoring, as well as intimacy, knowledge, and mutuality.… [T]he other is both my fellow beloved creature and an utterly unique and irreplaceable threatening violence like Derrida supposes it to be; it is now a doxological rejoicing in a gift. To say that the other is a gift is not to reduce him or her to a possession with which I can do what I want; it is to say that my first mode of encountering the other is a posture of wonder and glory-giving to the God of lofty intimacy.[16]

DIAGONALIZATION AND CHRISTIAN HIGH THEORY

To conclude, let's look at how a Christian high theory might diagonalize Western culture.

[15] Christopher Watkin, *Jacques Derrida (Great Thinkers)* (Philipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2017), 98.
[16] Watkin, *Biblical Critical Theory*, 74.

	Historic/ Traditional View	Christian Diagonalization	Late Modern View
Identity	Identity is assigned by the community.	Identity is received from Christ.	Identity is assigned by our individual selves.
Happiness	Happiness is found through stoically detaching our hearts from material goods and pleasures.	Our primary source of happiness is our relationship with God, and our heart's loves are reordered to reflect this.	Happiness is found through indulging in material goods and pleasures.
Morality	We must meet social and moral standards. Moral absolutes overrule personal morality.	We live according to God's law, not to earn our salvation but as a joyful response to all he has done for us. We apply its wisdom to our lives and enjoy the benefits.	We must be free to act according to our own individual will. Personal morality overrules moral absolutes.
Power	Power is exercised by individuals through their individual choices.	Earthly power should not be sought. Rather, we love others in service as Jesus and the early church did in order to display the gospel and transform society.	Power is used by structures and groups. Claims about morality and truth are attempts to seize power.
Truth	The only truth is what can be scientifically proven.	Truth is given to us by God and his Word via revelation. We can discern truth according to gospel-based reasoning.	Truth may be discovered through science, but it is primarily found within the self and its personal perspective.
Hope	The past was better, and the future will inevitably decline.	All time periods—past, present, and future—exhibit both the benefits of God's grace and the effects of sin, and will continue to do so until God's kingdom reigns on earth. However, positive change is possible for the future.	The past was misguided, and the future will inevitably be better.

Over the last two generations, several major thinkers have produced compatible and complementary critiques of secular, Western culture. They fall short of what we've been calling a Christian high theory because they are mainly negative and only cite Scripture very generally. They are two Catholics (Alasdair MacIntyre and Charles Taylor), one liberal Protestant (Robert Bellah), and one Jewish writer (Philip Rieff). Here is a summary of the basic critiques these thinkers and a few others have laid out:

- **The supreme, fragile, and weaponized self:** Modernity is the first culture in history that located authority inside the self rather than outside and looked at the autonomous self as the solution to the world's problems, not the source. Yet our self-created selves are the most fragile they've been in history. Even constant affirmation is not enough to ground us.
- **The problem of moral relativism:** Modernity led to the loss of any coherent moral language. In his book *After Virtue*, Alasdair MacIntyre argues that the Enlightenment project of reason-based morality failed, and the result is political and social fragmentation.[17] No one can any longer make a case for why something is right or wrong. They can only yell.
- **The loss of community:** The logic of the market invades the interpersonal, making all relationships transactional rather than covenantal, as well as undermining community and especially the family. Local institutions and neighborhoods decline as people are mobile and lack social trust. Individuals are "freer," but more isolated, anxious, addicted, and depressed.
- **The iron cage of efficiency:** Economic and technological efficiency become ends in themselves. Language about moral ends or intrinsic human good is lost. The result is increasingly impersonal bureaucracy and ethical crises over the definition of personhood. Capital is used only to increase profits, not for the end of justice, which is now indefinable.
- **The illusion of objectivity:** Modernity was built on claims that we can come to absolutely certain knowledge—that we can see things as they are—only by reason and science, not with recourse to faith or values. The reality is that, in modernity, one set of value-laden beliefs has replaced another with the disingenuous denial that this is what has happened.
- **The inevitability of polarization:** Modernity fosters the growth of ideologies—human, political, and social schemes raised to absolute, unquestioned status. The loss of any ability to define the common good leads to the absolutizing of tribal warfare.
- **The hatred of limits:** Modernity's absolutizing of individual freedom makes people despondent in the face of natural limits that other human beings have accepted not only as givens but as goods—our body's gender and appearance, our mortality, and the restrictions of living in a community with others.
- **The inability to endure suffering:** Modernity locates its human meaning in material goods, physical conditions, and emotional happiness, making its members more vulnerable to anxiety, depression, and trauma. Modern people are less able to endure suffering than any other people group in history.
- **The inability to face and name evil:** Modernity's restriction to the immanent frame, its denial of transcendent reality, puts it in a position of having to account for inveterate

[17] Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2013).

human evil in merely psychological or sociological categories. Its intellectual resources for understanding and confronting evil are the most limited of any culture in history.

- **The amnesia of biblical roots:** Modernity does not acknowledge the historic genealogy of its main institutions (human rights, democratic nation-states, social welfare, capitalism, science)—namely, that they came from Judeo-Christian roots. It does not admit the cultural capital of biblical ideas, such as the *imago Dei* and God's law, or ask what happens when that capital recedes.

When discussing a Christian high theory, a few final questions usually arise: "Who gets to say what Christian high theory *is*? Won't there be disagreements over what the Bible says to the cultural issues? And who gets to have their views prevail?" Of course, Protestants do not have a magisterium to adjudicate among different opinions, and so they have faced this problem before. As Protestants, we do not want this theory to be vaguely based on theological themes but forged in close contact with the Bible—all of it, not just certain parts. Like the Bereans in the book of Acts, we must go to Scripture to try to make our best case not in rhetoric and slogans but out of theological exegesis. With a devotion to biblical truth and a humble yet confident attitude, our high theory can be made accessible and understandable to laypersons—and all the more influential.

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PART SEVEN

Contextualization

Over a century ago, American pastor Harry Emerson Fosdick made his case for abandoning doctrines like the virgin birth and the literal resurrection. His argument was that we had to adapt our faith to changing times. When the term "contextualization" was first coined by Shoki Coe of the World Council of Churches in the early 1970s, evangelicals considered it an attempt by those making major departures from doctrinal orthodoxy to justify their actions. At first, the term meant changing biblical doctrine to be more aligned with the trends of the times.

In the 1980s to 1990s, however, evangelical missiologists led by John Stott and others came to understand that "faithful contextualization" was an irreplaceable part of mission, not only when taking the gospel into a new culture but also when seeking to embody and communicate it to a changing culture and a new generation.[1] (Some of this history is recounted in my book *Center Church* and won't be treated here.[2])

THE BIBLE AND CONTEXTUALIZATION

The book of Acts shows us contextualization in the early church. In Acts 13:16–41, Paul shares the gospel in a synagogue to Jews, those who believed in the God of the Bible. In Acts 14:8–17, he shares the gospel to a pagan, "blue-collar" crowd. Finally, in Acts 17:19–31, he speaks to a "white-collar" pagan audience—the philosophers on Mars Hill. The differences and similarities between each of these gospel presentations are striking. They show that the eternal gospel is being expressed in different ways to different listeners.

The work of the Holy Spirit is directly involved in contextualization. Jesus begins the book of Acts saying that the Holy Spirit would move them to take the gospel to "Jerusalem … Samaria, and to the ends of the earth" (1:8). In other words, it was the will and work of the Holy Spirit to break through cultural barriers and enable the church to proclaim the gospel in different social settings. Then, in one of the great cultural moves forward, the Spirit sets up the meeting of Philip with the Ethiopian official (Acts 8:29, 39).

Paul directly calls us to contextualization in 1 Corinthians 9:19–23. He mentions that he "became like" someone under the Mosaic law and "became like" someone not under the Mosaic law.

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[1] See John Stott and Robert Coote, eds., *Down to Earth: Studies in Christianity and Culture* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1980). See especially the appendix: "The Willowbank Report."

[2] Timothy Keller, *Center Church: Doing Balanced, Gospel-Centered Ministry in Your City* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2012). I will not here repeat all I have said in *Center Church* about contextualization and will instead give more space to supplemental material.

The Mosaic law regulated food, dress, and behavior in such a way as to create a wholly distinct culture. Paul then says that, as an evangelist, he contextualized not just his message but himself.

By living in a community and truly becoming part of the society, a missionary allows people to see the gospel embodied in love, honesty, kindness, and loving our neighbor. This enables nonbelievers to get a sense of what they might look like as Christian members of their own culture.

In 1 Corinthians 1:22–24, Paul gives us two encapsulated examples of how the gospel confronts the idols of both Greek and Jewish culture yet fulfills and completes the deepest aspirations of each. Yale professor Lamin Sanneh states:

> Paul faced the combined demands of Jewish particularity in seeking messianic consolation and the Greek expectation of philosophical emancipation by affirming the cross. … He writes to the church at Corinth: "For the Jews demand [power] and Greeks seek wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles, but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the [true] power of God and the [true] wisdom of God" (1 Cor 1:22–24). The gospel is thus recognized by both Jew and Greek as [both a challenge to and] a confirmation of their respective particularity.[3]

In Revelation 7:9–10, John paints a wonderful picture of followers of Christ. Wheaton professor A. Scott Moreau describes it as a group from "every nation, tribe, people, and language standing before the throne of God. … This massive gathering of worshipers does not homogenize them [culturally]: they retain their ancestry and linguistic frames of reference. But they are clearly unified in worship of God and Christ. … [T]his [is] a marvelous image characterizing contextualization."[4]

All throughout the Bible, authors contextualized. (See also John's use of Greek philosophy's *logos* in John 1 and the use of the Hittite suzerain treaty in the book of Deuteronomy.)[5] But perhaps most telling of all is the fact that Jesus' incarnation was itself an act of contextualization. God did not just come to earth as a human. He came as a Jewish Galilean, a particular, culturally contextual human being, so we could understand and grasp who he is. Jesus is the Word become flesh (John 1:14). He is the "exact representation" in human form "of [God's] being" and of "the radiance of God's glory" (Hebrews 1:3). God adapted to us and accommodated human nature. Just as Jesus became fully human yet without sin (Hebrews 4:15), so are we to adapt and accommodate the gospel message to cultures without compromise. Indeed, Jesus says in John 20:21 that "as the Father has sent me, I am sending you."

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[3] Lamin Sanneh, *Translating the Message: The Missionary Impact on Culture* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1989), 34.

[4] A. Scott Moreau, *Contextualizing the Faith: A Holistic Approach* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2018), 2.

[5] Meredith G. Kline, *Treaty of the Great King: The Covenant Structure of Deuteronomy: Studies and Commentary* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2012).

WHAT IS CONTEXTUALIZATION?

Contextualization is adapting the expression and practice of biblical truth to people of a particular culture, so it is as understandable and compelling to them as possible, without compromising that truth in any way. That means we must avoid two things: over-contextualization, which fails to honor the truth by altering the truth itself rather than its expressions and practices; and under-contextualization, which fails to honor the truth by making it unnecessarily alien and incomprehensible.

Contextualization distinguishes between essentials and nonessentials. On one hand, we must be sure not to remove any of the essentials of the gospel that may potentially offend, such as the teaching on sin, the need for repentance, the lostness of those outside of Christ, and so on. On the other hand, we must be sure to remove any nonessential language or practice that will confuse or offend the sensibilities of the people we try to reach. Determining the difference between essentials and nonessentials is an inevitable part of contextualizing to new cultures, new times, and new generations.

Contextualization is not giving people what they want to hear. It is giving them what God says (that they may not want to hear!) but embodied in cultural dimensions to which they can relate, and argued for in terms they can understand and on the basis of things they already believe. Contextualization is to be "receptor" or hearer-oriented rather than exclusively "sender" or speaker-oriented. It is to lovingly take on the burden and do more of the communicative "work" necessary to connect so that the listener does less. This is the Christ pattern of servanthood applied to communication. It happens at the intersection of God's unchanging Word and our constantly changing world and settings.[6] It is, as Moreau says, "how the people of God ... live out their faith in light of the values of their society."[7]

WHY CONTEXTUALIZE?

Contextualization is inevitable, theologically. Nothing in Scripture is revealed to simply be known abstractly. Rather, everything is revealed to be obeyed in our concrete situation (Deuteronomy 29:29). This is because "the Creator-creature relation is a covenant relation, a Lord-servant relation."[8] All revealed truth is a summons by God to know him and obey him. The effect of this understanding of the Scripture as "covenantal revelation" is to keep united what has traditionally been separated, namely meaning and application. Calvinist theologian John Frame notes:

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[6] Harvie M. Conn, *Eternal Word and Changing Worlds: Theology, Anthropology, and Mission in Trialogue* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1984). See also "Contextualization: Where do we begin?" in *Evangelicals and Liberation*, ed. C. Amerding (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 1977); "Normativity, Relevance, and Relativity" in *Inerrancy and Hermeneutic: A Tradition, A Challenge, A Debate*, ed. Harvie M. Conn (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Publishing, 1988).

[7] Moreau, *Contextualizing the Faith*, 2. Moreau's books, including *Contextualizing in World Missions: Mapping and Assessing Evangelical Models* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Publications, 2012), are important and well-informed yet very accessible.

[8] John M. Frame, *Doctrine of the Knowledge of God (A Theology of Lordship)* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 1987), 13.

> Over and over, preachers (and others) try to proclaim the "meaning" of the text and then its "application"—the first part is "what it means," the second "what it means to us … [But] every request for meaning is a request for an application … The one who asks doesn't understand the passage well enough to use it himself … A person does not understand Scripture, Scripture tells us, unless he can apply it to new situations, to situations not even envisaged in the original text (Matthew 16:3; 22:29; Luke 24:25; John 5:39ff.; Romans 15:4; 2 Timothy 3:16ff.; 2 Peter 1:19–21-in context).[9]

Frame's argument is this: we don't understand what a text means unless we understand how we are to use it and obey it in our own concrete situation. When we use this approach in ministry design, the results are radical. Many biblical scholars have tried to distill a single, pure ministry design or church structure from the Bible which must then be faithfully reproduced whatever the context. Frame argues that this is a misunderstanding of Scripture as covenantal revelation. Instead, the biblical absolutes that give the church its form must take different shapes as they become expressed in different times and cultures.

There will be many church models and ministry designs that are all biblical. Therefore, there is no such thing as one pure theological expression that can be extracted from Scripture and which then must be contextualized. All theology is, to one degree or another, already culturally contextualized in its very form. For example, systematic theology synthesizes and organizes doctrinal truths around some of the key issues and questions we ask. But what determines the questions on that list? Why does a theologian ask the particular set of questions he or she does? It is largely because our experience in our time and culture suggests such questions to our mind. Then we seek answers to them in the Bible. The result is a culturally influenced systematic theology. In the Westminster Confession of Faith, for example, there is nothing that addresses ancestor worship because none of the Westminster divines were asking questions related to that issue. In some Asian cultures, however, that is a pressing issue. Contextualization, then, requires that Christians in any particular culture ask questions of the Bible that were not raised by traditional, historic (usually Western) confessions and catechisms.

Consider this example: the Bible clearly directs us to use music to praise God, but as soon as we choose a kind of music to use, we enter a culture. As soon as we choose a language to speak in—or whether to aim its vocabulary at the educated or the less educated, at the artistic or the entrepreneurial or the technological—we are moving toward the social and cultural context of some people and away from the context of others. We do this when we choose a particular level of emotional expressiveness and intensity and even when we choose an illustration as an example for a sermon. We become more accessible to some and less accessible to others.

Thus, every systematic theology ever written is "contextualized" already. And in every age and culture, we must come to Scripture with new questions relevant to that time and society.

[9] Ibid., 83–84.

Since we are not relativists (who teach that truth is entirely subjective and bound by our experience), we should not discard or demote the penetrating and comprehensive confessions of past eras. But new congregations must not only propagate formulae that were the result of another century's set of questions; they must also answer the questions of their own age and apply the gospel to the forms of confusion and brokenness we confront now.

Here's another example. The Bible teaches the "priesthood of all believers"—the ministry of the laity. This must be true in a biblical church *anywhere* and *anytime*. But a particular plan of lay leadership in one setting may assume the lay leaders bring strong management skills to the table. This should be modified to emphasize the gifts of a working-class town, where people are less acquainted with managing others. A plan for training lay leaders to run small groups that are highly structured (ten minutes for this, thirty minutes for that) should be modified to emphasize the culture of a neighborhood that is more spontaneous and relational with their time.

Modification such as this is an outcome of the gospel, which is both humbling and affirming in that it removes any superiority or inferiority complex within us. A religious attitude that says "I obey; therefore, I am accepted" leads to either pride if we live up to those standards or inferiority if we fail to do so. But the gospel that says "I am accepted through Christ; therefore, I obey" makes us both humble and confident at once.

There are, similarly, two mistakes we can make when contextualizing.

For instance, we can refuse to adapt to new environments, times, or people groups. This shows an inappropriate sense of superiority. In this case, we have made our own particular culture into an idol. Without the deep security of the gospel, we need to convince ourselves that we are okay because our ways of doing things are better.

On the opposite end of the spectrum, we can be over-eager to change and adapt to new environments, times, or people groups. This shows an inappropriate sense of inferiority. We are, perhaps, making the new culture or its approval into an idol. Without the deep security of the gospel, we need to convince ourselves that we are okay by getting the approval of others.

The gospel makes us contextualizers. If we need the approval of the receiving culture too much, it shows that we lack confidence in the gospel. If we need the trappings of our own culture too much, it shows that we lack the humility the gospel should create in us. The gospel directs us to neither hate tradition nor be bound to it. It is prideful to imagine that Christians in the past were worse at contextualizing than us—therefore, we do not ignore tradition. But it is also prideful to think that new cultural trends have no grace in them and that former cultures were all more spiritually pure than present ones. Thus, we adapt.

APPROACHES TO CONTEXTUALIZATION TO AVOID

Two categories of under-contextualizers are "refusers" and "reducers." Refusers employ no contextualization. Some refuse to admit any legitimacy to contextualization at all. Many pit sound

gospel ministry against contextualization and see it as a synonym for compromising to "give people what they want."

Reducers contextualize the superficial trappings of their environment but not the message. They believe we should contextualize, but they reduce the idea to simple presentation or packaging. The emphasis is on a ministry's style, ambiance, and other aspects of branding. Deeper issues of how contextualized persuasion occurs are ignored.

There are also two categories of over-contextualizers: "reflectors" and "removers." Reflectors change the message too much but keep the superficial trappings of culture. The church merely reflects the culture—a thermometer rather than a thermostat. Evangelicals often do not change their doctrine but are unaware that they adapt to modern transactional consumerism and market-driven business practices or power politics. Much of liberal, mainline Christianity maintains a traditional air and look while extensively altering the message of the gospel.

Removers are those who deliberately remove historic doctrines or even try to remove some believers from the church altogether in an effort to create a faith or spirituality that avoids past sins of the church and fits the times.

MODELS OF CONTEXTUALIZATION[10]

It may be useful for practitioners to understand the various models of contextualization that are already at play in the church-planting world.

TRANSLATION MODEL

In a translation model, the emphasis is on distinguishing the "kernel" of biblical truth (the transcultural, unchanging primary part of Christian theology) from the "husk" (the changing, secondary items and traditions of Christian theology) so that we can transplant the kernel into a new cultural setting and language. The emphasis is on evangelism and the contextualization of the message.

There are a few potential problems, however. This model tends to make us refusers or reducers who emphasize the superficial. It also fails to look deeply at the receiving culture to see if there are (by general revelation) any truths and good aspirations to affirm and build on. The translation model also stresses communication and fails to see the other dimensions of contextualization—social, artistic, organizational, and the like.

[10] See Moreau, *Contextualization in World Missions*, 36–47; Stephen Bevans, *Models of Contextual Theology: Revised and Expanded Edition* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2002); Robert J. Schreiter, *Constructing Local Theologies* (London: SCM Press, 1985). My list here largely follows Bevans.

COUNTERCULTURAL MODEL

While the anthropological and transcendental models put the emphasis on cultural affirmation (see below), countercultural models distrust the culture and emphasize the critique of its idols. While translation models put the emphasis on communicative persuasion, countercultural models see the church itself as the witness—the community as a counterculture.

But these models may run into the "Amish" problem: if Christians are seen as completely distinct and not really members of society, can the counterculture really be a persuasive witness? Even if non-believers admire Christians from afar, the countercultural model can make Christianity seem like an option that requires a total severing of ties to other friends and families. Also, the countercultural model tends to be too negative about the surrounding culture and fails to acknowledge general revelation.

PRAXIS OR "LIBERATIVE" MODEL

This is the model of contextualization that puts the emphasis not so much on communication or countercultural community but rather on doing justice and bringing about social change. While the translation and countercultural models tend to work with a "Christ against culture" mindset, this tends to see God at work in the culture in various social liberation movements. The church contextualizes by focusing on actions instead of words and ideas, namely joining others in working on behalf of the poor and oppressed. The goal is not necessarily right thinking (orthodoxy) but right practice (orthopraxis).

The first two sets of models lead to church growth, but this model often neglects evangelism and community formation—and even orthodox doctrine. As such, there is a potential to not actually see many lives transformed in Christ. Without changed lives, we do not have agents to be salt and light in the society. The praxis model also tends to make the church seem unnecessary, leading many to wonder why they shouldn't just look to secular political organizations.

TRANSCENDENTAL (OR SUBJECTIVE) MODELS

The term "transcendental model" is unique to Stephen Bevans. It is also the most difficult to define or practice. While the first three sets of models are largely critical of the new culture and tend to allow those outside of the culture ("outsiders") to be the leaders in contextualizing the faith, this one emphasizes allowing converts inside the culture ("insiders") to take the lead. Converts from the culture are exposed to many kinds of Christian teaching. They may read, or receive the teaching of, church fathers such as Augustine or Luther or be exposed to the hymns of Wesley, but how these are interpreted greatly depends on the convert's social and cultural location. They develop an authentic contextual faith that is both true to church history and orthodoxy and also to the new culture. It is therefore the Christian experience of insider converts

that sets the pace and path for contextualization. This is an "organic" approach rather than a program-driven one.

One obvious issue with this model is—even if we allow the subjective experience of the converts to set the pace—how did those original converts hear the gospel in the first place? Didn't some contextualization happen beforehand? Another critique is that this approach is too abstract. How is it practically carried out? While this process of balanced contextualization has worked well in some times and places, is there any guarantee it will always work universally?

ANTHROPOLOGICAL MODELS

The anthropological models are on the opposite end of the spectrum from translation models. All the emphasis is on learning from and affirming the receiving culture so that new converts of the Christian faith retain their full cultural membership and identity. This model expects Christian theology to be significantly changed and altered by the surrounding culture. Usually, the argument is that God is already at work in the culture, and it is the job of missionaries to find it and ally with it. Those who are part of the culture and familiar with it are given clear leadership in contextualizing.

The strength of this model is that it recognizes that all knowledge is culturally embedded. There is no transcultural or acultural expression of the gospel. But a weakness is that it tends to result in people becoming reflectors or even removers. There is the danger of syncretism, the loss of the ability to use the Bible to critique the culture, and the loss of a distinct Christian identity.

SYNTHETIC MODELS

This is, as Moreau says, "a middle of the road model in which advocates try to take the best from [the other] models and synthesize a both/and approach. It demands no compromise of orthodoxy yet it takes all the aspects of context seriously."[11] It will, like the translation model, put great emphasis on persuasive evangelism that doesn't compromise historic doctrines; it will, like the countercultural model, emphasize the church as an alternate society; it will, like the praxis model, think about movements of social justice; it will, like the anthropological model, look for common grace and general revelation truths on which to build an approach of "subversive fulfillment." (See the following DNA paper, "Cultural Engagement.") It also tries to equally empower both cultural insiders and outsiders to seek for a contextualized faith.

As with the others, though, there are potential problems. As Moreau says, this approach has "no fixed formula" and feels more like "the work of an artist." Second, it can try for a simple "split the difference" compromise instead of a new way forward. Third, proponents using the same basic model can land in a number of places on the spectrum. In some, the context is given more

[11] Moreau, *Contextualization in World Missions*, 40.

formative power—in some, historic orthodoxy is stressed more—so those using the synthetic model might be less aligned with each other than the users of the other models. On the other hand, this greater freedom, flexibility, and scope for creativity might be seen as a strength.

On the whole, most of City to City's work throughout the years has tended to deploy a more synthetic model. Yet most of our emphasis has traditionally been on the gospel message, and so in that sense we also deploy a translation model. This paper and surrounding discussion may help City to City think about contextualization more holistically, beyond just evangelism.

SPIRAL CONTEXTUALIZATIONS

Gospel communicators must seek to correct the receiving culture's prejudices, errors, and idolatrous distortions. But at the same time, we must use the interaction with culture as an opportunity to reflect on the ways in which our own understanding of the gospel is culturally incarnated and somewhat distorted. Contextualization is a two-way process. Communicators can then notice and correct their own cultural prejudices and misappropriations of the gospel even as they seek to correct the culture's basic assumptions of the gospel. Without this, the contextualization process simply will not work.

This is why contextualization is a two-way street: biblical orthodoxy corrects the culture, yet the cultural context can show us where our orthodoxy is less than biblical. But these two dynamics are not a fully equal balance. While the *Bible* cannot be corrected by non-Christian cultures, *Christians* can be. (A refusal to allow our own Christianity to be corrected means we assume our Christianity is perfectly biblical.) A non-Christian philosophy or culture can point out (through general revelation) biblical insights that Christians have missed. Such a process shows us what part of our own framework is really biblical, and what part is our own cultural or emotional baggage. But while Christians can be corrected, the Bible is truth, and it is not an equal partner with any culture. Instead, it stands over the culture to judge it, distinguishing the good from the bad.

Finally, we should consider that the Bible itself is contextual—it is embodied in its own time and place and has to be applied to new times and places every time we study it or preach it. All this means there are three ways contextualization can work.

The first is *circular contextualization*. If Scripture and culture are equally authoritative, then movement back and forth between text and context is an endless circle of change. In every generation, we change our theology to fit our times.

But if Scripture is our supreme authority, and the interaction with culture is for the purpose of understanding the text more accurately (not to bring it into line with the culture), then the text-context movement is a *fast, loose spiral*, moving toward better and better understanding of the Word of God.[12] A fast, loose spiral assumes that we can arrive at the perfectly contextualized Christian faith in a culture after a couple of years and a few interactions. This approach

[12] See Grant R. Osborne, *The Hermeneutical Spiral: A Comprehensive Introduction to Biblical Interpretation* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 1997).

underestimates the complexity of flawed, often culturally blind Christians bringing contextualized biblical truth into a new time and place.

A *slow, tight spiral* assumes that contextualization, while we pray it becomes increasingly biblical, is ongoing and takes a great deal of time and thought and is always far from perfect.

In short, spiral contextualization works extraordinarily hard to affirm general revelation and common grace in a culture, but nevertheless critiques a culture's idols with God's special revelation in his written Word. It is Scripture that must have the final word and authority.

CULTURE AND PERSUASION

Missiologist David Hesselgrave breaks down epistemological and cultural approaches to reality into three groups. He calls them "Western" (or "Conceptual"); "Chinese" (or "Concrete Relational"); and "Indian" (or "Intuitional").[13] I would summarize his categories in this way:

- **Western or Conceptual approach:** People make decisions and arrive at convictions through analysis and inquiry. This is common among educated people, persons in science vocations, older Americans, and Northern Europeans in the West.
- **Chinese or Concrete Relational approach:** People make decisions and arrive at convictions through relationships. They think concretely in terms of pictures and stories. This is common among less educated people and those who have lived in a particular area for a long time.
- **Indian or Intuitional approach:** People make decisions and arrive at convictions through insight and experience. This is common among many Eastern peoples (Indian, Buddhist) and now much more common among younger generations in the West.

Despite the fact that Hesselgrave calls all Americans Conceptual, it remains true that these variations occur somewhat within a given culture. For example, educated, upper-class Americans will be more truly Conceptual, especially older male Americans working in vocations shaped by technology. Concrete Relational thinking is common to less educated Americans and those who have been born and raised in one region. Many educated Americans who work in the arts and younger persons are Intuitional in their approach. The Intuitional approach may also characterize certain regions of the U.S.

Here's an example of how these approaches affect reality. If someone asks, "Why should I be a Christian?" there are three basic ways to "communicatively" approach the answer.[14]

- **The Conceptual, Rationalist:** "You should become a Christian because there are good reasons to do so." If you are more of a presuppositionalist, you conclude, "Here are the arguments." If you are more of an evidentialist, you conclude, "Here is the evidence."

[13] David J. Hesselgrave, *Communicating Christ Cross-Culturally: An Introduction to Missionary Communication* (Grand Rapids MI: Zondervan, 1978), 198–236.

[14] These three ways of communicating come from John Frame's three perspectives on knowledge laid out in *Doctrine of the Knowledge of God*.

- **The Concrete Relational, Situationist:** "You should become a Christian because we are your people, and God has made us a good people. We love each other. Look at the community we have." This answer puts less emphasis on the intellectual and more on the communal.
- **The Intuitional, Existential:** "You should become a Christian because God has changed me. I experienced power and love and joy, and he can change you, too." This answer puts less emphasis on the intellectual or communal and more on individual experience.

Every culture tends to emphasize one of these epistemologies over the others, but they are one-dimensional and reductionistic. The Bible, however, involves all three aspects in knowledge of God. Unless we eventually use all three approaches, we are not really showing *all* of the biblical bases for the truth. What should we do? (Remember what we have learned about contextualization.)

On one hand, we should lead with one of these approaches, depending on the person we want to reach. Older, educated Westerners tend to be rational. Many traditional cultures are very situationist. Younger, less educated Westerners tend to be very existential. To get an initial hearing and to avoid offense, we should choose the epistemology that fits and will receive the best initial hearing.

On the other hand, we must also implement the other aspects of biblical truth and knowledge of God, or we will over-adapt to the culture. To be too rational or too existential, for example, is to give in to the idol of the particular culture. Individualistic people need to be humbled into a more community-based style of living. Rationalistic people need to be less proud of their logic and reasoning.

A BIBLICAL THEOLOGY OF PERSUASION

1 Corinthians 2:1–5 reads:

> And so it was with me, brothers and sisters. When I came to you, I did not come with eloquence or human wisdom as I proclaimed to you the testimony about God. For I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and him crucified. I came to you in weakness with great fear and trembling. My message and my preaching were not with wise and persuasive words, but with a demonstration of the Spirit's power, so that your faith might not rest on human wisdom, but on God's power.

This is a controversial and important passage. It is the main place in the Bible that Paul addresses how he persuades people when he communicates the gospel. A superficial reading of the text seems to indicate that Paul did not use logic, argument, or learning, but rather simply told the

gospel and expected the Holy Spirit to convict—or not. However, while Paul says here that he does not use "persuasive" words, he says in 2 Corinthians 5:11 that he does! Paul cannot be saying that he makes no arguments or has no strategies for changing people's minds.

The fullest treatment of the meaning of the words "eloquence," "superior wisdom," and "wise and persuasive words" is in Anthony Thistleton's enormous commentary on 1 Corinthians.[15] In summation, Paul is rejecting a few things. The first thing he rejects is verbal bullying: using forceful personality, witty and cutting disdain, or super-confident demagoguery to beat listeners into wanting to be on the speaker's side. Instead, he advocates a spirit of humility. He doesn't promote the applause-generating, consumer-oriented type of rhetoric that plays to a crowd's prejudices, pride, and fears instead of making careful, sound arguments. And he rejects telling manipulative stories, overwhelming the crowd with shows of verbal dexterity, or emphasizing wit and erudition over expositing what the text says.

A BASIC MODEL FOR PERSUASION[16]

Listeners (or potential "receptors" of the gospel) automatically interpret communication from the perspective of their own context. It is an extremely tiring and difficult process for a receptor to comprehend communication that is not provided within his or her frame of reference. (By a "frame of reference," we mean a person's culture, beliefs, language, vocabulary, life situation, perceived needs, and so on.) Can you imagine reading a technical computer journal if you have no background at all in the field? The technical journal makes no effort to begin with a beginner's frame of reference. Soon, you, the receptor, tune out and become numb.

There are two basic approaches to communication: sender-oriented and receptor-oriented. When the communicator designates his frame of reference as the one in which communication takes place, the receptor must make most or all of the adjustments. As we have seen, this is quite tiring, difficult, and often unsuccessful. In this case, the receptor is in a dependent position. They must ask many questions, listen, deal with many strange and uncomfortable concepts and conditions, look up many words, ask for a great deal of help, and constantly check and re-check meanings. In short, the receptor is forced into a vulnerable position. However, when the communicator designates the receptor's frame of reference as that in which the communication will take place, the roles are reversed! Now, the communicator is in a dependent position. They must ask the questions, listen, deal with many strange and uncomfortable concepts, look up words, ask for a great deal of help, and constantly check and re-check meanings. The communicator has become vulnerable. Sender-oriented communication is one-way communication for the sender, but two-way for the receptor. But receptor-oriented communication is two-way communication

[15] Anthony C, Thiselton, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians: A Commentary on the Greek Text* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2000).
[16] What follows is based on Charles Kraft's *Communication Theory for Christian Witness* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1991).

throughout. The latter is much harder and more complex for the sender but far more comfortable for the receptor and far more successful.

God's communication approach is receptor-oriented. In the Bible, we see that God adapts his message without changing it. In Deuteronomy 18:15–19, when the people complain that they cannot listen to God's voice directly, God sends his message through the medium of a human prophet. He does not simply maintain the same communication channel and form. In Philippians 2:6–7, we see that incarnation is a form of communication. Jesus entered into our framework. We could not see God's glory face to face (Exodus 33:20), but now we behold his glory in Christ (John 1:14). In 1 Corinthians 9:19–22, we see the principle of communication that Paul practiced throughout the book of Acts. There, we can see significant adaptations in his preaching from audience to audience. He varies his use of emotion and reason, his citation of authorities, his vocabulary, his points of contention (avoiding unnecessary issues), and his identification of the hearers' concerns, hopes, and needs.

In countless ways, God adopts familiar conventions, literary genres, and terms that the hearers can relate to. For example, when God entered a relationship with Israel, he adopted a cultural form: the specific format of the Near Eastern suzerain-vassal treaties of the era. John the apostle takes the concept of *logos* from Greek philosophy of his day. The very concept of biblical theology shows us that God unfolds revelation in a history, in stages, with each stage adapted to the ability of the people to whom he speaks.

CONTEXTUALIZATION BASICS FOR PEOPLE OF ANOTHER CULTURE

Here are five basic steps for trying to contextualize the gospel to another culture.

1. LISTENING

Show you know their world. Respect and use their codes: language and vocabulary, nonverbal cues (space, timing, gestures, emotional expression, level of transparency, humor, posture, tone, and so forth); and non-deliberate signs of character (humility, compassion, authority, commitment). Show you connect (by knowledge and empathy) with their experiences, concerns, topics of interest, aspirations, fears, complaints, sources of information, and cultural reasoning.

2. AFFIRMING

Agree with some of their beliefs. Affirm some of their criticisms of the church, Christians, and "your side." Show humility and respect for a well-made point. Genuinely affirm something important that they believe and aspire to. Call it an "X" belief. State their belief in a strong, compelling way—as well as or better than they could state the belief themselves.

3. CHALLENGING

Critique some beliefs with other beliefs they hold.[17] Pose a problem that we or they face. Describe it with deep sympathy, and sincerely share in their distress as much as possible. Describe it to show its seriousness and lack of apparent solution. Argue that the problem is caused by a "Y" belief of theirs that is either a cause of the problem or completely fails to do anything about the problem. Argue that the Y belief is not consistent with their own X belief, or that the Y belief fails to fulfill an aspiration raised by X. For example, the belief that individuals should be free to develop their own, subjective moral framework may be the Y belief, and the belief that human beings have a moral obligation to pursue social justice may be the X belief. These beliefs contradict each other. Argue against their beliefs on the basis of their own premises and standards, not just yours. Cite authorities and figures they know and respect—quote their own "prophets" against them—and align it with the Bible.

4. HUMBLING

Don't rest your identity on your ideas. Don't take disagreement personally at all. Don't let criticism and approval have any effect on your sense of self. Be loving, gracious, humble, kind, and self-controlled.

5. REDIRECTING

Show that their good aspirations can only be fulfilled in Christ.[18] Show how a change of belief (adopting belief "Z," a Christian truth) would solve the problem. Show how belief Z is not only more consistent with belief X but fulfills the longing behind it. Show that what X believers have been looking for is only found in Christ. Show that the plot lines of their lives will only come to a happy ending in Christ. Show them the cost of changing their belief Y to belief Z, but also the far more extensive richness of Christian belief (restabilize after destabilizing the equilibrium).

ALL THE DIMENSIONS OF CONTEXTUALIZATION

It is too easy (for Westerners especially) to think of contextualization as strictly a matter of *verbally* communicating the gospel and persuading people. This is indeed important, but it is essential to

[17] The theological basis for this is Romans 1–2, which says all humans know the truth about God but partially repress it. Any worldview that does not start with a Triune God means they will misunderstand the created world at some point. But being created in the *imago Dei* means they will also understand the world rightly in many ways. Inconsistency should be expected and looked for.

[18] This approach, which has been called "subversive fulfillment," will be revisited in the DNA paper "Cultural Engagement," as well as later papers on evangelism and mission.

have what Moreau calls a more "holistic" approach. He names seven dimensions in which the Christian faith must be contextualized in any given culture.[19]

Below are the dimensions of culture.

THE MYTHIC OR NARRATIVE DIMENSION

These are the stories and narratives a culture tells itself to convey its values and its purposes. As we have said, worldview is really a social imaginary: it is conveyed more by compelling stories and narratives than propositions and arguments (see the DNA paper "Worldview and Catechesis"). Gripping stories can convey one culture's values of individual freedom and liberation and another culture's highest value of the sublimation of individual happiness and self-interest for the good of the people, the family, or the nation.

THE ETHICAL DIMENSION

These are the rules of how people in a particular culture should behave as they relate to one another and to the world. They are maps for behavior. This dimension takes basic values conveyed by the narrative dimension and applies them to actual situations: it tells you how someone animated by the culture's values must live in a series of practical situations.

THE SOCIAL DIMENSION

The social dimension of any culture consists of how that culture—on the basis of its values conveyed in stories and ethical rules—links and relates individuals to one another into a community. Moreau says it does this through association (what shared characteristics are valued), kinship (the place and form of the family), learning (the way people are educated and decide what is important to impart), politics (the way authority and power are distributed and the particular governing order that is maintained), and capital exchange. The last is the most complex. Every culture defines various forms of capital and the way one accrues, uses, and exchanges one for the other. Different kinds of capital include economic wealth, a lofty position of power, higher education, a symbolic status, age, beauty, or a large following.

[19] Moreau's entire book *Contextualizing the Faith* treats these dimensions. He gives an overview of them on pages 4–10.

THE CREATIVE DIMENSION

This is how "people symbolically capture and express ideas, values, and themes" through material production.[20] That includes art, of course, but it also includes everything produced by technology.[21] What we create on the basis of our values then reshapes us. For example, we may create pencils because of a cultural value, but making writing accessible to more people has a transformative effect on the culture.

THE RITUAL DIMENSION

These are the kinds of repetitive practices—ceremonies, holidays, celebrations, ways of marking and making sense of transitions—that every culture uses to order time and understand daily life according to its values.

THE EXPERIENCE DIMENSION

Every culture has ways of dealing with and experiencing the transcendent. Secular cultures simply bracket it out. Charles Taylor speaks of modernity's "immanent frame" and "buffered self"—a denial of the supernatural (see the previous DNA paper, "Biblical High Theory"). Other cultures are extremely open to the supernatural and various forms of spirituality.

THE PHILOSOPHICAL DIMENSION

Finally, many cultures work out a set of their beliefs and truths that they hold, whether formally or informally. This is their culture's "doctrine" or "truth." Westerners tend to think that these truths are developed rationally and then take shape mythically, ethically, socially, creatively, ritually, and experientially. The reality is infinitely more complex, as we have hinted. The dimensions all mutually affect one another.

How do we contextualize every dimension? While most missionaries rightly put emphasis on the philosophical—how to persuade people of a particular culture that Christianity is true—they often give far too little thought to the other dimensions. Remember that we are "spiraling" toward sound, contextualized faith in a particular culture, meaning we are both adapting to the culture but also critiquing it with the Bible. There are plenty of questions to work through:

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[20] Moreau, *Contextualizing the Faith*, 36.

[21] See Andy Crouch's helpful book *Culture-Making: Recovering Our Creative Calling* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2008).

- How do we learn in an intuitive, less rational culture? What about a pragmatic culture?
- How do we tell a new, yet compelling story about sexuality that will counter the sex-as-authenticity story that secular cultures tell?
- How do we speak about and practice prayer and the Christian experience in a highly mystical, superstitious culture? What about a secular culture?
- How do we teach about building our families in a culture that makes an idol of family? What about a culture that demonizes the traditional family?
- How do we organize the church in an authoritarian culture? What about an anti-institutional and anti-authoritarian culture?
- How do we help people integrate their faith with their secular work?
- How do we help Christians exchange capital in a particular culture so non-believers will listen and take them seriously?
- How do we talk about sin in a moralistic culture, a shame-based culture, and a relative, individualistic culture?

Below is an example of how the principles in this paper might be applied in both a U.S. and Taiwanese context.

APPENDIX A: "Four Spiritual Laws Contextualized for Taiwan"[22]

	U.S. Context	Taiwanese Context
Law 1	God loves you and offers a wonderful plan for your life.	God the Father loves all the people of the world and wants them to be in his family.
Law 2	Man is sinful and separated from God. Therefore, he cannot know and experience God's love and plan for his life.	But people are disobedient and do not remember to show filial love to God the Father, so they now have no face (no honor).
Law 3	Jesus Christ is God's only provision for man's sin. Through him, you can know and experience God's love and plan for your life.	The only way back to God the Father is to become a righteous people.
Law 4	We must individually receive Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord; then we know and experience God's love and plan for our lives.	The only way to become a righteous person is to come to the man on the cross.

[22] Based on the work of Glen Francis, and cited in Moreau, *Contextualizing the Faith*, 46. This is obviously a translation model of contextualization.

APPENDIX B: "The Dream of the Rood [Cross]"

This is a poem written by an unverified Anglo-Saxon author. Written in the genre of dream poetry, it tells the account of the crucifixion from the perspective of the cross on which Jesus hung. The Anglo-Saxon culture was a pagan, warrior, shame-and-honor culture. Observe how this poem seeks to contextualize the gospel to the culture within which it was written.

> I was reared up, a rood. Then I saw, marching toward me, mankind's brave King. The young Hero—who was God almighty—stripped Himself, eager to mount the gallows, unafraid of the sign to many: He would set free mankind. I raised the great King, liege lord of the heavens. They drove me through with dark nails: on me are the deep wounds manifest, wide-mouthed hate-dents. I shook when his arms embraced me but I durst not bow to the ground. Stand fast I must.
>
> How they mocked at us both! I was all moist with blood sprung from the Man's side after he sent forth His soul. Darkness covered the bright radiance of the Ruler's body. Shadows lowered, dark under the clouds.
>
> They lifted Him down from the leaden pain, left me standing in a sweat of blood. I was all wounded with shafts. They set to contrive Him a tomb, carved it of bright stone, laid in it the Bringer of victory, spent from the great struggle. They began to speak the grief-song. Their hearts were sick to death, their most high Prince they left to rest there with scant retinue.
>
> He tasted death; nevertheless, the Lord arose in His great might to succor men. Then He ascended into Heaven. He shall return again to earth, seeking out mankind, on Doomsday. May the Lord be our friend, He who once suffered on the gallows-tree. The Son, mighty in battle, came back victorious.
>
> —"THE DREAM OF THE ROOD," EIGHTH CENTURY AD

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PART EIGHT

Cultural Engagement

Interacting with culture is crucial to doing ministry in major cities—but it must be done with biblical wisdom. Even if we live in our native country, we are surrounded by groups and generations who are culturally different from us. This is especially true in cities. City to City's DNA regarding both contextualization and cultural engagement highlights the relationship between Christianity and culture as a significant factor. And while these two practices are related and overlap, contextualization mostly focuses on how the church's message and form are culturally shaped for a particular time and place, while cultural engagement focuses on the church's relationship to the society around them. What does it mean to be "salt and light" in the civic order, yet also "pilgrims" and "exiles"?

For many churches there is no more important contemporary issue than this. Christians may find themselves unified in their doctrine (though even this is becoming less and less common) but divided over how they should relate to their surrounding cultures. What should the church's relationship to politics look like? Should it even be involved in the field of politics at all? Does the church seek to change the culture around it, or does it take a step back and let it manage itself?

City to City advocates that Christians be deeply, faithfully present in their surrounding culture and maintain a mentality of serving people rather than coercing, disparaging, or avoiding them—all without assimilating to culture's ways or compromising the values of the gospel. This sounds like an impossible task, but our unique identity as followers of God and his gospel makes it possible. By employing an attitude of what we call "subversive fulfillment"—respectful critique—we can both subvert and fulfill culture's aspirations through Christ.

THE DANGERS OF CULTURAL ENGAGEMENT

First, it's important to know what the inherent dangers of cultural engagement are. Many of these problems stem from unbalanced, extreme relationships that churches establish with the world around them. For example, there are Christians who think culture is in terrible decline and engage in *power-seeking* to rectify it. However, using political power—rather than transforming society through servanthood as Jesus did—ironically causes these people to become too conformed to the world.

There is also the danger of *assimilating*. This approach sees culture more positively—progressively moving toward greater justice and inclusion—and wants the church to join liberal and liberationist social movements. Though this group often believes it is distinguishing itself from

society, the ironic danger here is that it is too conformed to it, particularly to its liberal trappings rather than its conservative ones.

Simply *withdrawing* from culture is another danger. This approach believes that by retreating into strong, tight-knit communities, Christians can avoid being polluted by culture. Yet this often results in the inability to learn from the culture and a blindness to seeing how much the culture has already influenced them. There is ultimately no way to prevent cultural engagement.

Finally, there is the danger of *ignoring* culture. Rather than intentionally withdrawing from society, this approach believes its local society is doing fine and doesn't need renewing. This approach does not think Christians need to work from a Christian worldview; they just need to work hard and skillfully. They believe there is no need to analyze the culture—their job is to simply build up the church, win people to Jesus, and leave culture as it is. Similar to the danger of withdrawing, this attitude blinds people to how culture has captured their hearts in ways the gospel challenges.

WHAT IS CULTURE?

Culture is the creation of a set of norms or values that attempt to answer the big questions: "Why are we here? What are, therefore, the most important things in life? What is wrong with the world? What will put things right?" Sociologist James D. Hunter says:

> Culture is ... a normative order by which we comprehend ourselves, others, and the larger world and through which we order our experience. At the heart of culture is a system of norms and values ... commanding truths so deeply embedded in our consciousness and in the habits of our lives that to question them is to question reality itself.[1]

All culture is unavoidably normative—that is, it names things good or bad, appropriate or inappropriate, forbidden or encouraged. It sets boundaries. Today's secular, Western culture is supposedly unlike traditional or religious cultures in that it claims to be "value-neutral," allowing people the freedom to define their own morality, identities, and meaning in life. A cultural value or practice is effective to the degree that its opposite is unimaginable. It is such a given that it is invisible *as* a cultural value or practice—it is "just the way things are." But modern culture lays down laws about sex, gender, and other issues of identity and strongly punishes people who deviate from them in order to make the opposing view not merely wrong but unthinkable. Even so-called liberated cultures have their own set of norms, forbidden words and practices, and valorizations and demonizations.

Culture is also theological. All human beings are made in the image of God (that is, to worship and reflect God) and instructed to "rule over" and "subdue" creation (Genesis 1:26–28). There have

[1] James D. Hunter, *Before the Shooting Begins: Searching for Democracy in America's Culture Wars* (New York: The Free Press, 1994), 200.

been enormous amounts of ink spilled over what this means. But one way to know what God meant for the first Adam to accomplish (Genesis 1) is to look at what the second Adam fulfills (Revelation 21–22). The passage states the new heavens and new earth will be neither wildlands nor a city. It will be a Garden City—densely populated but with rivers and trees everywhere. This wondrous city, this highly developed civilization, *is* the Garden of Eden remade and cultivated. Note the Tree of Life within it! All the potentialities and energies that God put into nature will be drawn out. God did not want the first Adam to just keep Eden as a park—he wanted it to be developed into a civilization.

Because we are all made in the image of God, we all treat some things as ultimate values, regardless of whether we are supposedly value-neutral. Thus, all cultures are in some way religious. Culture arises out of the ultimate human need to worship something, as in the description in Romans 1:25 that people have "worshiped and served created things rather than the Creator." And because all humans received the mandate to rule and subdue creation—to create culture—we all are prone to do so. Out of our capacity as image-bearers, we take dominion over nature to create things, not arbitrarily, but in service to the things we worship (Genesis 1:26–27, 2:15). (Christians, of course, are to create cultural products that worship the Creator God and not create idols.) Culture, then, is making things that serve and depict a particular normative view of reality.

Culture is the creation of a *secondary environment* in the service of some set of norms or values, the things we value and worship. What does a "secondary environment" mean? Culture takes the raw material of nature (the primary environment) and forms it into language, habits, ideas, beliefs, customs, social organizations, and technical processes to form a secondary environment. As theological ethicist H. Richard Niebuhr explains in *Christ in Culture*, "A river is nature, a canal culture; a raw quartz is nature, an arrowhead culture; a moan is nature, a word culture."[2] Christian historian Mark Noll eloquently discusses how culture is formed out of the raw material of nature:

> Who formed the world of nature (which provides the raw material for physical sciences)? Who formed the universe of human interactions (which is the raw material of politics, economics, sociology, and history)? Who is the source of all harmony, form, and narrative pattern (which is the raw material for art)? Who is the source of the human mind (which is the raw material for philosophy and psychology)? And who, moment by moment, maintains the connection between our minds and the world beyond our minds? God did, God does.[3]

THE MIXED NATURE OF CULTURE

The view that all cultures are essentially normative and, in a sense, religious, could lead to an absolutist view of culture—a view that the culture of a society is a unified whole, and that some

[2] H. Richard Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture* (New York: Harper and Row, 1951), 34.

[3] Mark Noll, *The Scandal of the Evangelical Mind* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1994), 51.

cultures are all good and others all bad. However, every culture has inconsistent impulses within it, in part due to the interplay of sin and grace but also because cultures frequently change. As distinct cultural subsets and generations emerge, they can influence a whole culture.

THREE VIEWS ON THE NATURE OF CULTURE

As mentioned previously, one view on the nature of culture is the *absolutist* view, which sees cultural forms as either pure (because the commanding truths of that culture are right) or impure (because the commanding truths are wrong).

The *relativistic* view sees all cultural forms as neutral and indeterminate because the commanding truths of any culture are all relative and arbitrary.

A *mixed view* believes all cultures have good elements, bad elements, and aspects that are neither good nor bad. This is the closest of the three to the biblical view, which is that all cultures are mixed because they interweave both godly and ungodly elements. Cultures are mixed because human beings are radically fallen yet also made in the image and likeness of God. Cultures may also have varying degrees of natural and special revelation within them, according to God's providential plan. Even in cultures where the Bible is influential, the depravity of human nature creates cultural idols that exist within it. And cultures with little or no influence from the Bible may still (depending on the level of God's common grace) contain many good elements, for God gives people a knowledge of moral truth in their consciences (Romans 2:14–15). Therefore, all cultures will reflect the fact that every person possesses the knowledge of God *to some degree*, even if it is suppressed (Romans 1:18–20). Yet every culture will also be distorted by sin to some degree, elevating finite values to the position of the absolute, and idolizing them.

Each culture will display goodness and fallenness in its own way. For example, conservative cultures often elevate the family or their race to an absolute value, which may lead to tribalism, oppressive moralism, or even complete intolerance of others. Liberal cultures tend to elevate individual freedom to an absolute value, leading to a loss of relational wellbeing between families and the community, as well as a lack of integrity in business and sexual practices. Yet both the importance of the family *and* the worth of the individual are rooted in a biblical worldview. In this example, both the collectivist culture and the individualist culture are mixtures of darkness and light.

THE ISSUE OF ADIAPHORA

The early church had to deal with the question, "Do Gentile converts have to become Jews to be saved?" In the writings of Paul and in the Council at Jerusalem (Acts 15), the apostles said the Mosaic law—circumcision, the dietary laws, and all the laws about remaining "clean"—were no longer binding on all believers. In Christ, they said, we are truly clean before God. Therefore, the Mosaic law was a practice associated with Jewish culture and was neither commanded nor forbidden to Christians. Such things have been called *adiaphora*, or "things indifferent." Nevertheless,

Paul shows in Romans 13:8–10 that all are still bound to obey the Ten Commandments. And in 1 Corinthians 8–10, he makes many distinctions, such as distinguishing Christians attending idol ceremonies (forbidden) from those eating food that has simply been dedicated to local gods in the market (allowed)—*unless* it leads other Christians to stumble. In that case, even though eating meat dedicated to an idol is *adiaphora*, we should abstain from eating it if it harms other Christians, gives them false impressions, or makes them prone to sin.

In contemporary society, cultures differ over many things that the Bible doesn't speak about directly. They are *adiaphora*. Anthropologists tell us that cultures tend to differ in the following areas:[4]

- **Time-orientation versus event-orientation:** Cultures have different understandings of punctuality and how to allot one's time.
- **Dichotomist versus holistic thinking:** Some cultures are more analytical and logical, while others are more holistic and intuitive in their epistemologies.
- **Crisis-orientation versus process-orientation:** Some cultures call for quick decisions, while others expect and trust gradual processes.
- **Task-orientation versus person-orientation:** Some cultures make results and completing tasks more important than the people working on the task, while other cultures reverse this.
- **Status-orientation versus achievement-orientation:** Some cultures assign status by heritage, tradition, or social role, while others see status as meritocratic accomplishment.
- **Individualism versus communalism:** Behind many cultural differences lie different valuations of individual freedom and duty to the community. Honor-based cultures put emphasis on duty; dignity-based cultures on freedom.

In general, the Bible either does not speak directly to these differences or it balances the factors (such as individual dignity and community duty). Therefore, while avoiding extremes, Christians can adapt within a new culture and a new generation to the prevailing *adiaphora* distinctives.

BIBLICAL THEMES RELATED TO CULTURE

THE TWO CITIES

Genesis 4 shows us the cultural mandate—the command to rule and subdue creation—being carried out in two basic ways. Cain builds a city, and his descendants develop culture within it, but it is a violent one. This city is Babel, and its inhabitants seek to "make a name" for their own glory (Genesis 11:4). At the time when Cain's brother Seth was born, however, people began to "call on the name of the LORD" (Genesis 4:26). Here we see two social orders developing. But the Bible

[4] See Sherwood G. Lingenfelter and Marvin K. Mayers, "Ministering Cross-Culturally: An Incarnational Model for Personal Relationships," https://aimint.org/pdp/wp-content/uploads/sites/36/2017/02/Cultural-values_tensions_final.pdf (accessed March 4, 2023).

shows us repeatedly that no earthly city—not even Jerusalem under David's rule—could fully embody the City of God, the social order based on love and the glory of God's name rather than on power and the glory of our name. It is impossible to create a fully Christian culture because, like human individuals, human cultures are a mixture of sin and grace. The New Testament does not give us details for governing a single Christian culture but sends Christians out to be full participants in their own cities while remaining citizens of the heavenly city.[5]

THE IMAGE OF RESIDENT ALIENS

The Bible as a whole points Christians toward an image of being resident aliens in our respective cultures. The Jews in Babylon were long-time residents, not tourists or permanent immigrants. They were fully engaged in the life of the culture, supporting its peace and prosperity yet maintaining distinctiveness as believers in God. James 1:1 and 1 Peter 1:1 also give Christians this model of living. James refers to Christians as tribes "scattered among the nations" and Peter calls us *parapademois*—"expatriates," long-term residents who keep their citizenship elsewhere. Although some theologians have branded the term "resident alien" as a form of withdrawal, that isn't how it is described in the letter to the exiles in Jeremiah 29. The resident alien metaphor combines the idea of being different with the idea of being the same—it avoids being both too assimilated and too alienated. Being a resident alien, then, is not so much a model for cultural engagement as a guide that keeps all of the models from becoming too extreme. It is also a flexible metaphor—Christians may be more active in the higher echelons of culture in one situation and more of a countercultural minority in another. To be an alien in the first culture reminds us that we do not, in the end, "belong"—we are from another kingdom. To be a resident in the second culture reminds us that we are to be an integral part of the society.

THE SPIRIT-RENEWING CULTURE

In Trinitarian theology, the Holy Spirit is the agent of renewal and regeneration. All things in creation, redemption, and restoration are *from* the Father, *through* the Son, and *in* the Spirit. Herman Bavinck sums it up in his *Magnalia Dei*:

> The pleasure, foreknowledge, power, love, kingdom, and strength is [of] the Father. The Mediatorship, the atonement, the grace, the redemption is [of] the Son. The regeneration, the renewal, the sanctification … is of the Spirit.[6]

[5] The biblical theme of the Two Cities—of man and of God—is also present in Isaiah 24–27, Galatians 4, Philemon 3, and Revelation 14–18; 21. Just as there is no one Christian culture, there is no one form of Christian politics—no one legislative platform or set of social policies—that is *the* biblical one.

[6] Herman Bavinck, *Magnalia Dei*, 169, https://www.monergism.com/magnalia-dei-ebook (accessed April 24, 2023).

It is well known that the Holy Spirit is the agent of personal, individual renewal and regeneration. But is that all he regenerates and renews? Psalm 104:30 tells us that God's Spirit "renew[s] the face of the ground," so he renews nature as well as human nature. And yet there is another intriguing indication that the Spirit renews culture itself. When God commands that the tabernacle be created with great artistic skill and beauty, we are told that the Spirit of God gives the artisans the necessary skills. What is striking here is that these artistic gifts are from the Spirit, but they are talents that produce cultural products. Exodus 35:30–35 says:

> Then Moses said to the Israelites, "See, the LORD has chosen Bezalel son of Uri, the son of Hur, of the tribe of Judah, and he has filled him with the Spirit of God, with wisdom, with understanding, with knowledge and with all kinds of skills—to make artistic designs for work in gold, silver and bronze, to cut and set stones, to work in wood and to engage in all kinds of artistic crafts. And he has given both him and Oholiab son of Ahisamak, of the tribe of Dan, the ability to teach others. He has filled them with skill to do all kinds of work as engravers, designers, embroiderers in blue, purple and scarlet yarn and fine linen, and weavers—all of them skilled workers and designers.

And so, we should pray, expect, and rely on the Holy Spirit as we engage our culture.

MODELS OF HOW THE CHURCH RELATES TO CULTURE

H. Richard Niebuhr's classic *Christ and Culture* sought to identify historical, theological models for relating the church to the cultural order. He identifies:

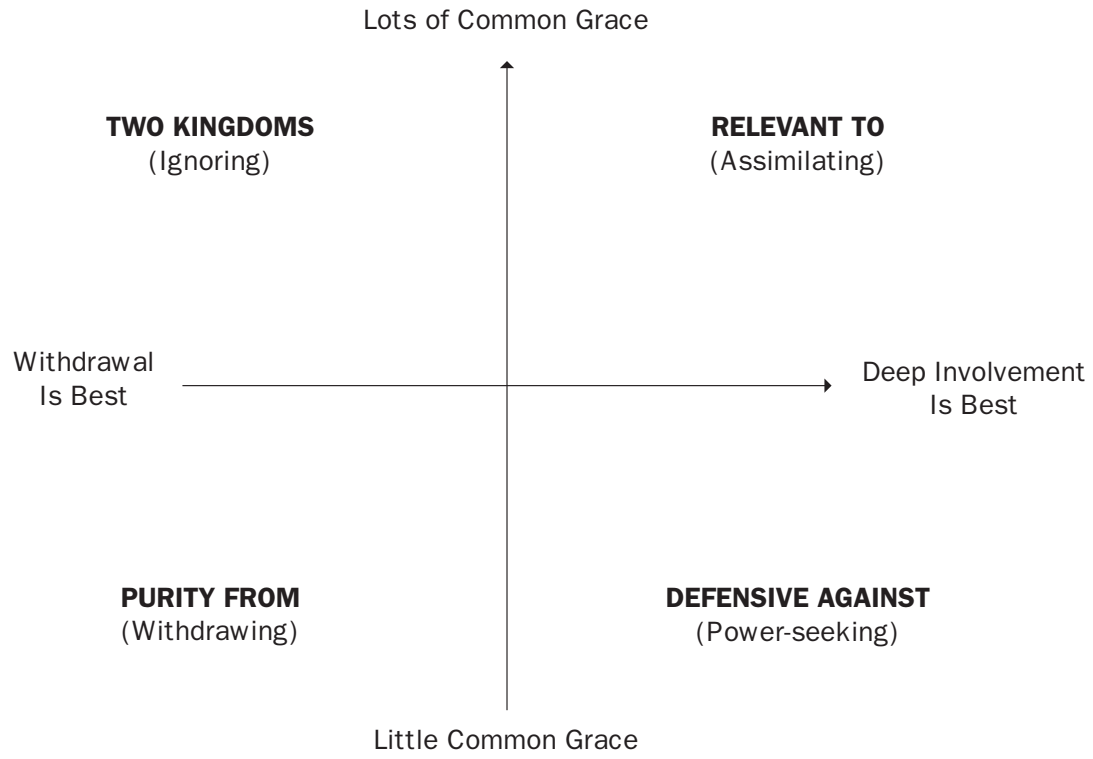
- the "Christ against culture" model of the Anabaptists, which advocates withdrawing from culture;
- the "Christ of culture" model of liberal thinkers, which seeks to join the culture;
- the "Christ above culture" model of the Catholics, which seeks to establish a state church that presides over culture;
- the "Christ and culture in paradox" model of the Lutherans and some Reformed individuals, which advocates building up the church and being hard-working and morally good individuals in the culture; and
- the "Christ transforming culture" model of other Reformed individuals, which seeks to penetrate society and influence culture.[7]

Despite the numerous critiques and reformulations of Niebuhr's work, most critics and thinkers arrive at somewhat similar categories. How can we discern the best way forward?

[7] Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture.*

There seem to be two axes against which we can graph the various approaches to relating Christ to culture. In the diagram below, the horizontal axis represents involvement. How much time and effort should the institutional church and Christians put into engaging culture, influencing it, and being involved in its society and politics? At one end of the continuum is the extreme of deep involvement (where Christians take political power in the name of Jesus, regardless of political affiliation), and at the other end is complete withdrawal (for example, the American Amish).

The vertical axis represents optimism and pessimism. To what extent is this culture viewed as good or evil? How likely is this culture to be influenced by Christianity? At one end of the continuum is the extreme belief that the culture is so filled with common grace it doesn't need influence from Christians; and the other extreme is that the culture is hopelessly sinful and not susceptible to any good influences. We can map within the two axes and see four basic models of relating Christ to culture.



Those in the "Relevant To" quadrant believe Christianity doesn't need to change so much as it needs to adapt to modern culture. They see God working powerfully in the culture (liberating oppressed people) and believe culture is favorable and open to Christians as they "update" the church. There are problems associated with this stance. While some approaches under-contextualize, this one over-contextualizes. It lets the world set the church's agenda rather than the gospel. It loses sight of the doctrine of grace, and falls into a belief that works beget righteousness. It tends to put too much emphasis on social forces as explanations for problems rather than sinful hearts.

It downplays the need for supernatural conversion. (This is, basically, the approach of mainline Protestantism and some streams of Catholic thought. It has the danger of *assimilating*, as mentioned earlier.)

Those in the "Defensive Against" quadrant believe Christians should seek to change culture. They see little grace in a society dominated by evil, but they believe that, with strategic power, they can make society a far more Christian-influenced one. As with the "Relevant To" quadrant, there are problems. The church itself is often forgotten as an agent for social change, and individual Christians expressing their worldview in their work takes center stage. Attempting to change culture by seizing control of it can potentially become a form of arrogance (forgetting the "not yet" in Christian eschatology) and of succumbing to a mentality of domination. It can veer into the territory of Constantinianism and a kind of theocracy. (This is, basically, the approach of the State Church and those who believe Christianity should be the official religion of the land. It has the danger of *power-seeking*, as mentioned earlier.)

Those in the "Purity From" quadrant believe Christians should not try to change culture but live as an alternate community that bears witness against the evil and injustice of modern society. They see little grace in the world and no real possibility of cultural change. The problem with this view is that it disengages with culture rather than being salt and light; both of these metaphors imply spreading out into the culture. It also ignores the indisputable fact that Christians have been able to improve corrupt societal practices in the past. Human rights, as our age knows them, are a Christian legacy; and the abolition of slavery was fueled by numerous Christian groups. (This is, basically, the Anabaptist approach, which puts great emphasis on separation of church and state. It has the danger of *withdrawing*, as mentioned earlier.)

Those in the "Two Kingdoms" quadrant believe Christians live in two realms. One is the church, which Christians build up through evangelism and discipleship. The other is the secular realm, in which Christians merely live good lives, not trying to change culture but relying on God's common grace to preserve it. But as with the other three stances, there are issues tied to this approach. Many societies are filled with injustice and evil. For example, the Two Kingdoms approach led to quietism in the face of Nazism. (See Bonhoeffer's writing on the great danger of "cheap grace."[8]) This view also assumes Christian faith doesn't distinctively shape how a Christian works out their vocation in the world. (This is, basically, the view of Luther. It has the danger of *ignoring*, as mentioned earlier.)

In *Center Church*, I make the case that all four models have good biblical grounding but none of the models—especially in their more extreme versions—embrace *all* of the biblical material on cultural engagement.[9] D. A. Carson asks us to seek out a model of Christ-and-culture relations that takes in the whole Bible but allows for different executions and emphases depending on the nature of the culture. In other words, we use the model that best fits our

[8] Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship* (New York: Macmillan, 1963).

[9] Timothy Keller, *Center Church: Doing Balanced, Gospel-Centered Ministry in Your City* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2012), 223–234.

situation—but do so remembering the need to balance it with insights from the other models and other parts of the canon. Carson describes two understandings of the biblical canon. One is the more liberal view that there are a number of different "paradigms" in the Bible.[10] In this view, for example, Paul and Luke have two somewhat different definitions of apostleship that cannot be reconciled. But the canon provides the "boundaries of the allowable paradigms,"[11] and so we are free to choose the one we want. Carson shows that Niebuhr assumes this more liberal view of the canon and so describes the Christ-and-culture paradigms in ways that are "pure" and incommensurable.

Carson then describes the second understanding of the biblical canon—the historic and now "conservative" view. In this approach, all the texts of the Bible, despite the very real differences and emphases, hang together as a whole so that it is possible to discuss what the Bible says about apostleship. In this view, for example, the Bible says Christians are to obey the government (Romans 13) but says elsewhere that the government can become demonic (Revelation 13). We are not to see these as contradictory statements but as different aspects of a biblical view of the state.

Carson reminds us of the basic elements of the biblical storyline—Creation, Fall, Redemption, and the final Consummation. He believes Niebuhr's models fail to take account of all the elements of the biblical storyline.

	Strong on	**Weak On**
Christ against culture	Fall	Creation
Christ of culture	Consummation	Fall
Christ above culture	Creation	Fall/Redemption
Christ and culture in paradox	Creation/Fall	Redemption
Christ transforming culture	Redemption	Consummation

Which of these models should we operate with? The answer, Carson says, is to pursue a comprehensive but flexible approach. The implications of these strengths and weaknesses of the "Christ-and-culture" paradigms are an important part of this resolution. Carson writes, "We should not think of each [model] in Niebuhr's ... scheme … such that we have the option to pick and choose which pattern we prefer."[12] Rather we should see all the models as aspects of "a holistic grasp of the relations between Christ and culture, fully aware as we make our attempt, that particular circumstances may call us to emphasize some elements in some situations and other elements in other situations."[13] He then asks if the church in southern Sudan is to adopt a different model for cultural relations than the church in Washington, D.C. His answer is that, while hopefully all Bible-believing churches would share a "more comprehensive model," "the outworking

[10] D. A. Carson, *Christ and Culture Revisited* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2008), 40–41.
[11] Ibid., 41.
[12] Ibid., 43.
[13] Ibid.

of that comprehensive vision is sufficiently rich and flexible to warrant appropriate diversity in outworking in these two very different cultural contexts."[14]

GOSPEL IDENTITY AND CULTURAL ENGAGEMENT

The Christian identity can give believers a unique cultural flexibility. But it is important for us to be aware of the potential problems that come with "other-oriented" identities. Consider Paul's identity before he followed Christ. It was an identity based on performance and pedigree, one that operated on the basis of a demonization of the "other." Such a way of life operated under the principle, "I'm okay because I am a respectable, religious, orthodox believer—not like those Christian cultists." With such an identity, persecuting the other is a way to bolster one's self-image. This, of course, stirred Paul to become a persecutor (Galatians 1:13). Croatian theologian Miroslav Volf opines that Cain became murderous because his identity (either as a good person or perhaps the better of the two brothers) was threatened by God's acceptance of Abel's sacrifices rather than his (Genesis 4:8).[15] Likewise, Peter's violence against the Roman soldiers was based on the need to express his identity as the most dedicated of the apostles (Matthew 26:33).

Both traditional and modern identities create these binaries of "good guys" and "bad guys" to bolster self-esteem by saying the same as the Pharisee in Luke 18:11: "I thank you that I am not like [these] other people." Traditional identities reinforce themselves by excluding people of other races, religions, and nations. Modern identities reinforce themselves by excluding people who do not subscribe to their views—those considered bigoted, narrow, racist, or sexist. Exclusion can take four forms: attack and drive out others; force them to choose between adopting your views or being marginalized; negotiate the subordination of the other (for example, segregation); or abandon the other entirely (for example, by simply ignoring them).

But the gospel makes us non-persecutors (Galatians 1:23). In Galatians 2:11–16, we see Peter slide back into cultural and racial superiority as he refuses to eat with Gentile believers. This is an example of a believer whose identity is not yet fully framed by the gospel. Peter's self-worth rested less on Christ's grace and righteousness and more on cultural difference, a binary that vilified the other, and performance and pedigree. Classism, ethnocentrism, racism, and similar forms of oppression come from the deep human impulse for self-justification—our failure to believe the gospel. If we try to counter racism with a legalistic, virtue-signaling, ideological anti-racism that fails to recognize an unbelief in the gospel as the true root of racism, we set up a new regime of self-justification and pride that leads to new oppressions. By comparison, a Christian's self-image and identity is uniquely stable. Christian identity is *received*, not achieved. Because of this, the emotional undulations of other performance-based identities are gone. Our worth is not based

[14] Ibid.

[15] Miroslav Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace: A Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness, and Reconciliation* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2019), 158–167.

on our performance, our assessment, or what others think of us, but on God's acceptance of us in Christ (1 Corinthians 3:3–7, 15:9–10; 2 Corinthians 5:17; Philemon 3:8–9).

The Christian identity is humbling but empowering at the same time. James 1:9–10 says, "Believers in humble circumstances ought to take pride in their high position. But the rich should take pride in their humiliation." This shows that the Christian identity simultaneously gives us a lowly position as a helpless sinner and a high position as an unconditionally loved child of the King. In Christ, we are perfect and loved in God's eyes—even though we are not good enough to deserve it. This simultaneously brings about humility and boldness. Performance-based identities can produce either humble people without confidence (who are down on themselves when not living up to standards) or confident people without humility (who feel better than others when living up to standards), but they will never produce both at the same time. The lower and infinitely higher positions the Christian identity surfaces in us stir us not to become self-hating or arrogant but fully confident and humble all at once.

How exactly does the Christian identity make us culturally flexible? Paul says that in Christ there is no Jew or Gentile, male or female, slave or free, for all are "one in Christ Jesus" (Galatians 3:28). Yet he later gives specific duties to males and females! In *Destroyer of the Gods*, New Testament scholar Larry Hurtado explains how both of these sentiments can work together:

> [Christians'] … ethnic, social, and gender distinctions are to be regarded as relativized radically, [for] all believers of whatever ethnic, sexual, or social class are now "one in Christ Jesus." But … these distinctions [are not] actually effaced. So … Paul persisted in referring to himself proudly as a member of his ancestral people, a "Hebrew" and an "Israelite" … but he also insisted that "in Christ" … these distinctions were no longer to be regarded as defining believers.[16]

Professor Richard Bauckham writes, "Almost certainly Christianity exhibits more cultural diversity than any other religion, and that must say something about it."[17] Christian identity does not need to exclude others in order to define itself. We are not defined as better performers than others, but as sinners saved by grace. Christianity can take critique and difference.

The Christian identity comprises multiple layers. Those layers include crucial components, such as gender, race, nationality, vocation, and so on. When you become a Christian, the Jesus component goes to the bottom, as the foundation of all the other components. If you are Chinese and become a Christian, you don't become African. You are still fully Chinese, and yet as a Christian you are also different. In Christ, race and other factors do not pass away—they are

[16] Larry Hurtado, *Destroyer of the Gods* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2016), 93–94.

[17] Richard Bauckham, *Bible and Mission: Christian Witness in a Postmodern World* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2003), 2. Bauckham was responding to statistics such as these: over 90 percent of Muslims live in a band from Southeast Asia to the Middle East and Northern Africa. Over 95 percent of all Hindus are in India and immediate environs. East Asia has 88 percent of all Buddhists. However, about 25 percent of Christians live in Europe, 25 percent in Central and South America, 22 percent in Africa, 15 percent (and growing fast) in Asia, and 12 percent in North America.

not even effaced—but they are "relativized." None of them function as our *chief* identity factor anymore.

If any of these other components is our most basic factor, it can lead to a performance-based, unstable self-image, as well as one that excludes, is tribalized, and acts cold toward those who do not share that identity. It also makes us blind to the idols of our particular culture. When the gospel changes us, and Christ's love becomes our most fundamental identity, the other factors can no longer lead us to pride and ignorance in relation to the weaknesses of our own culture. At first, it might be assumed the gospel simply makes Christians one more tribe that looks down on those who do not share its truth, but a Christian who acts this way forgets the gospel of grace: namely, that we deserve death but are saved by sheer grace. Having a Christian identity means admitting we are not spiritually or morally better than those who believe differently from us. It can give believers a unique cultural flexibility as it is a more fundamental identity than any other factor (Galatians 3:26–28), but it does not erase other factors of our identity, such as ethnicity (Romans 9:3). It relativizes these factors without effacing our social standing (James 1:9–10).

THE PRACTICES OF ENGAGING CULTURE

In what ways can we engage culture? Many of the following are either covered in other papers on City to City's DNA or need greater treatment than we can provide here. Nevertheless, here are a few ways we must engage culture:

- **Developing a Christian high theory or social theory:** Before we can speak the gospel to a culture (contextualization), we need to interpret the culture with the gospel. Using the Christian worldview and a deep knowledge of the patterns and narratives of the Bible, we must analyze the patterns and narratives of a culture to discern the good, the bad, and the indifferent.
- **Contextualizing the gospel message and the church:** As we contextualize, we must both adapt to culture and resist it so that those in the culture can hear the gospel in the most compelling way possible. This is cultural engagement through evangelism and apologetics that resonates with a large number of people.
- **Integrating faith and work:** Christians must work either in the dominant cultural economy or in an alternate one, doing their work non-triumphalistically and from a distinctly Christian worldview. They should be motivated by serving the common good and have an appreciation for common grace.
- **Being political without being partisan:** The institutional church must strike an important balance. It must discipline believers to be salt and light, loving our neighbors by making society a more just and good place for all to live and therefore being involved in politics. Yet this must be done without the church itself laying out a specific political and cultural agenda for change.

- **Tackling specific forms of injustice locally and nationally:** This must be done without a legalistic and arrogant spirit. Christians must seek as many multi-partisan alliances as possible, being open about their Christian identity without excluding allies, guided by the biblical ideas of justice rather than secular, ideological accounts.
- **Engaging in conversations with non-believers both publicly and privately:** Christians must build bridges and open doors to talk to other religious and ideological groups. We are to model talking with civility, humility, patience, and love.

HELPING CHRISTIANS CONSUME CULTURE

Another substantial step in engaging culture is to help Christians learn to consume cultural products wisely, appreciatively, and cautiously. Christians' reactions to culture are often simplistic and don't perform analysis beyond the behavioral level. This comes from a theologically "thin" view of sin, which sees sin as *only* discrete acts of noncompliance to God's regulations. But a theologically "thick" view of sin sees sin as a compulsive drive of the heart to produce idols.[18] Cultural idols stem not just from a disbelief in God but from rejecting the gospel and looking to human action to save us. Romantics such as Rousseau demonized human culture and idealized getting back to nature to get in touch with our true selves. Marxists demonize the free market and idealize a government-controlled economy. Ideologies such as these believe that if we manipulate certain factors properly, social problems will evaporate.

If we have a thin understanding of sin, we will jettison any cultural artifact that depicts overt actions of sexual immorality, profanity, or violence. (An obvious example is avoiding movies that depict any form of sex outside a monogamous marriage between a man and a woman.) But the complex nature of our sin will still be at work within us, making idols out of things that are not overt forms of law-breaking—such as moral goodness, financial security, our family, doctrinal purity, or pride in our own culture. In fact, too much emphasis on withdrawing from culture makes the likelihood of slipping into these "respectable" idolatries even greater. However, if we have a thick understanding of sin—as idolatry that pervades all we do—we are less likely to withdraw or uncritically consume and instead be led toward humble, critical engagement. (There is *certainly* room for Christians to specifically withdraw from particular products of culture that prove notably harmful, especially when we are young. We are talking here of a blanketed, widespread withdrawal or uncritical consumption.) We should identify idolatries in popular culture as ways of repenting for the seeds of the same sins in our own hearts and subsequently avoiding them.

[18] When does the pursuit of a legitimate goal become idolatry or "ideology"? In *Idols of Our Time*, B. Goudzwaard says, "An ideology arises the moment the end indiscriminately justifies every means. … Thus a nation's goal of material prosperity becomes an idol [the ideology of materialism] when we use it to justify the destruction of the natural environment or allow the abuse of individuals or classes of people." B. Goudzwaard, *Idols of Our Time* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 1984), 23. Similarly, a nation's goal of military security becomes an idol (the ideology of militarism) when we use it to justify the removal of rights to free speech and a fair judicial process, or the abuse of an ethnic minority.

Simplistic reactions to culture also stem from a theologically thin view of common grace and natural revelation. The language of Romans 1:18–25 gives us a comprehensive and dynamic picture of how this grace is expressed in an individual's life. The "truth" is being "suppressed," but it continues to bear down on us. Verse 20 states that "since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities ... have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that people are without excuse." The verbs *nosumena* ("are being understood") and *kathopatai* ("are being seen") are in the form of present passive participles. That is, the reality of God's nature and our obligations to him are continuously present to us. The knowledge of God in every human heart should not be thought of as static, innate ideas or information, but as a continually fresh, insistent pressure on the consciousness. Psalm 19 says that nature declares truth and yet does so without words. So, when Isaiah 28:24–26 says that God instructs the farmer in agricultural science out of his wisdom of nature, it speaks in terms of general revelation—the farmer is not conscious of actual ideas and concepts being conveyed to him. He believes he is discovering things himself.

In short, every human being who produces culture (and everyone does!) is in a deep dialogue with the general revelation of God. Therefore, human culture is a complex mixture of brilliant truth, marred half-truths, and overt resistance to the truth. We should be willing to be engaged with human culture because even overtly non-Christian cultural productions will ordinarily have some witness to God's truth. Even the angry, blatantly anti-God culture is to a degree a testimony to God's reality. Many of these have an air of desperation about them and vainly try to stamp out what followers of the culture know in their hearts. By the same logic, even overtly Christian-produced culture will ordinarily have some idolatrous discourse within it. When we become Christians, we continue to have powerful amounts of residual sin and continually struggle with our idolatrous impulses. Our Christian cultural production will not be free from these.

In general, then, this means we should maintain a stance of *critical enjoyment* of human culture. On one hand, it means that when we recognize that a cultural artifact is an obvious (perhaps even hostile) resistance to God's general revelation, there is no need to delve deeply into it or expose ourselves to it repeatedly. On the other hand, it means to recognize the widespread expressions of justice, wisdom, truth, and beauty in any culture.

ENGAGEMENT THROUGH SUBVERSIVE FULFILLMENT

In *Plugged In: Connecting Your Faith with What You Watch, Read, and Play*, Daniel Strange says the following:

> The gospel is the subversive fulfillment of culture …. It subverts in that it confronts, unpicks and overthrows the world's stories. It calls for new ways of looking at the world because the old ways are so useless and harmful. It's an appeal for repentance and faith in the better story of Christ crucified. However, the gospel fulfills in that it connects and is shown to be worthy of our hopes and desires. The gospel is appealing

> in that it's a call to exchange old hopes and desires for new ones, because these new ones are the originals from which our false stories are smudged and ripped fakes.[19]

In 1 Corinthians, we are told that the Jews looked for signs of power, and the Greeks looked for philosophical wisdom when deciding what to believe. Paul points out that the gospel subverts both these things when he says, "we preach Christ crucified: a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, but to those whom God has called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. For the foolishness of God is wiser than human wisdom, and the weakness of God is stronger than human strength" (1 Corinthians 1:23–25). God takes the Jews' desire for power and the Greeks' desire for wisdom and adds a new dimension—they are reclaimed by Jesus and put into his story to serve a glorious purpose and become ways to understand God. We must think of the stories our culture tells us and the themes it espouses. What are the followers of that narrative searching for? Freedom? Peace? Satisfaction? Status? Identity? What is it that *we're* looking for? How does the gospel both confront the search for these things and recontextualize it toward Jesus? How does the crucified Christ subversively fulfill these stories?

Strange tells us that by looking at Paul's subversive fulfillment approach in Acts 17, we can discern four steps to cultural engagement:

- **Entering:** Stepping into the world and listening to the story. "For as I walked around and looked carefully at your objects of worship …" (verse 23).
- **Exploring:** Searching for elements of grace and the idols attached to them. "People of Athens! I see that in every way you are very religious. For as I walked around and looked carefully at your objects of worship, I even found an altar with this inscription: TO AN UNKNOWN GOD" (verse 23).
- **Exposing:** Showing up the idols as destructive frauds. "Therefore since we are God's offspring, we should not think that the divine being is like gold or silver or stone—an image made by human design and skill" (verse 29).
- **Evangelizing:** Showing off the gospel of Jesus Christ as "subversive fulfillment." "So you are ignorant of the very thing you worship—and this is what I am going to proclaim to you" (verse 23).[20]

Notice that the steps in Strange's model of subversive fulfillment blend the insights of different cultural engagement models. We range from being supportive and appreciative to being critical.

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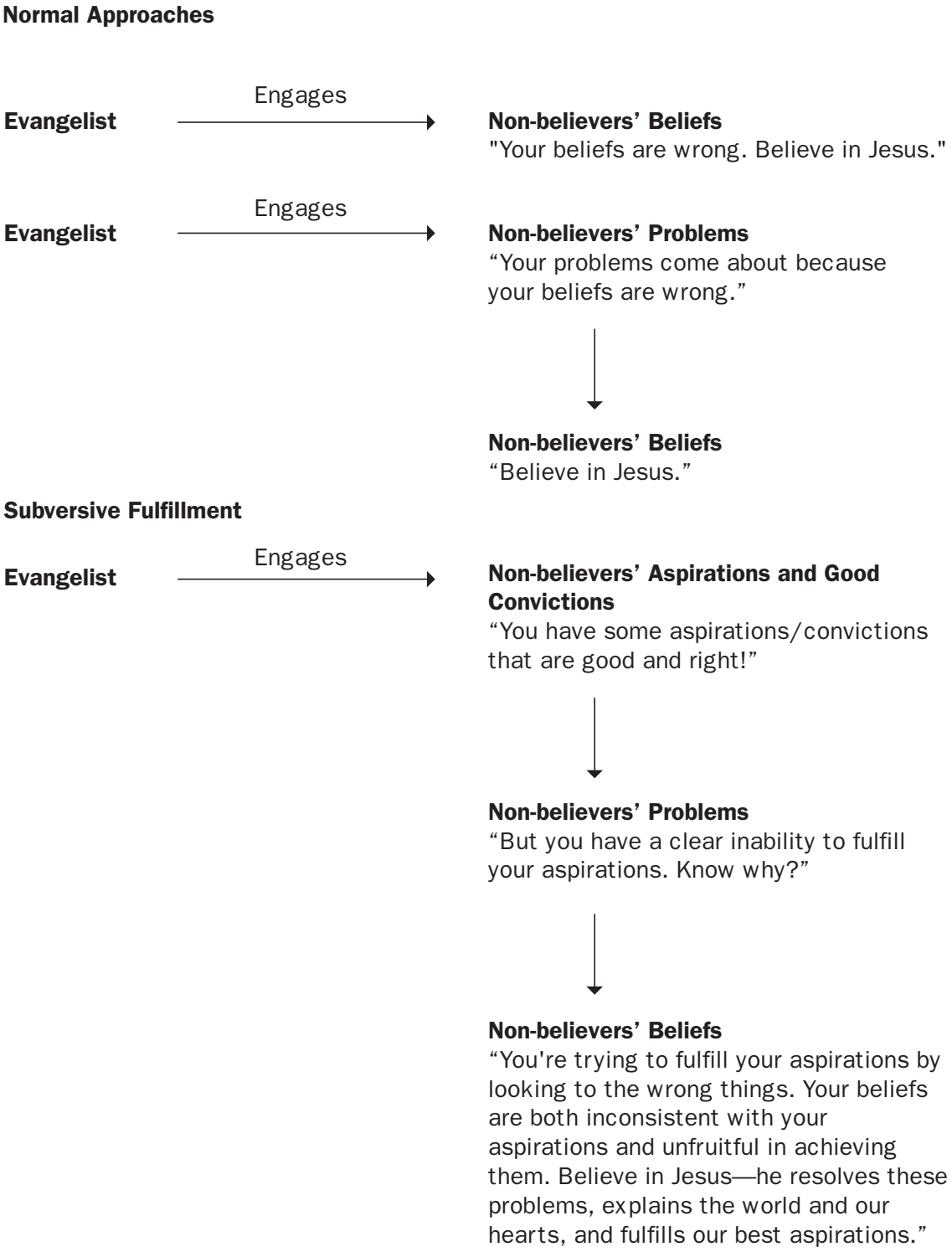
[19] Daniel Strange, *Plugged In: Connecting Your Faith with Everything You Watch, Read, and Play* (Epsom, UK: Good Book Company, 2019).

[20] Ibid., 119.



Here is a case study in subversive fulfillment from Africa. African scholar Lamin Sanneh argues that Christianity subversively fulfills Africans rather than simply confirming them or erasing their African identity. Africans have a long tradition of believing in an active, supernatural world of good and evil forces. But this can bring fear to our hearts—how do we protect ourselves

and thrive in such a world? If Africans go to a secular university, they will be told the solution is to see that there are no spirits—neither evil nor good—and that everything has a scientific explanation and solution. Ironically, their professors would say they wanted to affirm African culture and hear their "voice," and then immediately squeeze the African-ness out of them.

Christianity takes a subversive yet fulfilling approach instead. It confirms the existence of the spirit world and affirms a desire to triumph over it. But, says Christianity, that cannot be done with various forms of magic, ritual, and observances. We cannot perform self-salvation before the forces of darkness. We should instead look to Jesus, who has defeated all the principalities and powers on the cross (Colossians 2:15), procuring forgiveness of sins, and breaking the power of him who holds the power of death—the devil—through the resurrection (Hebrews 2:14–15). In the gospel, the existing African "framework was reconfigured without being overthrown."[21] Christianity honors the African understanding of the condition and problem of human life, but it offers a solution—an invincible Savior. Sanneh concludes:

> People sensed in their hearts that Jesus did not mock their respect for the sacred [as secularism does] or their clamor for an invincible Savior, and so they beat their sacred drums for him …. Christianity helped Africans to become renewed Africans, not remade Europeans.[22]

Hallelujah! What a Savior!

[21] Lamin Sanneh, *Whose Religion is Christianity?: The Gospel Beyond the West* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2003), 43.
[22] Ibid.

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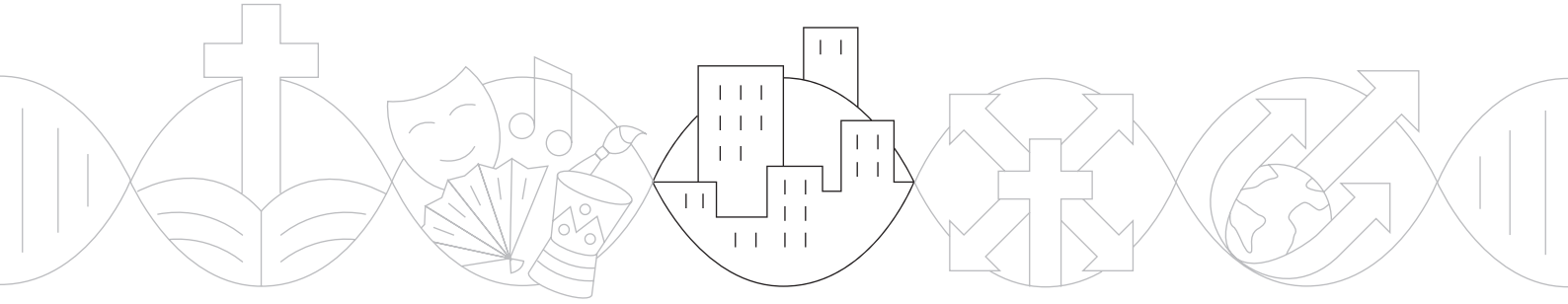

City

Because the city is the most
strategic context for
Christian mission, we:

- *Love and serve the city in all its beauty and brokenness.*
- *Multiply churches in the great cities of the world.*
- *Continually learn and adapt to complex and changing urban environments.*

PART NINE

City Theology

The next two papers deal directly with the nature of the city. This one is on a biblical theology of the city, while the following is about contemporary urban theories that animate a great deal of social policy and development in cities. The book *Center Church* speaks mainly about the theology portion.[1] Rather than completely recapitulating what is in the book, the following supplements the material (partially through summarizing and highlighting important parts of it).

A VISION FOR THE CITY

What does it mean to have a vision for the city? For me, this question grew out of another question entirely: how do I communicate and embody the gospel to my city's time and place? Reaching city-dwellers is a substantial undertaking regardless of where we live, and so it stands to reason that we must lay out a coherent vision for doing so if we are to find success. A church that hopes to make an impact on their city *must* ask itself visionary questions about how and why they will do so.

That questioning will in turn lead to another question: how are we to view cities? All Christians seeking to answer this should first make every effort to look at the world through the lens of Scripture. If we look at the city through Scripture, we get both a vision *of* it and all its complexity as well as a vision *for* loving, serving, and reaching it. City to City is a movement of Christians and church leaders around the world who are called to carry out this vision of loving, searching, and reaching our great cities.

A culture's most popular view of the city differs from continent to continent and region to region. In many parts of the world, cities tend to be viewed positively. Yet in North America, there is a strong anti-urban bias, especially among evangelical Christians. Redeemer Church in New York City was formed in opposition to this bias, and therefore much of its earliest material and rhetoric promoted the positive things the Bible says about the city. Yet, as we see below, the Bible has a balanced view of both the evil and the goodness of cities. Christians in parts of the world that have an overly positive view of the city need to heed the Bible's warnings about it. Christians in parts of the world that have an overly negative view of the city need the Bible's exhortations to love and reach it. In short, the biblical theology of the city has whatever the Christians in our area need to hear! But it is up to church leaders to apply that teaching in ways that are most needed by their Christian communities.

[1] Timothy Keller, *Center Church: Doing Balanced, Gospel-Centered Ministry in Your City* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2012).

ALTERNATE THEOLOGIES OF THE CITY

French theologian Jacques Ellul and his friend and fellow cultural critic Bernard Charbonneau sought a biblical perspective in their critiques of the city. Charbonneau saw Babylon as the quintessential city of the Bible, while Ellul looked at Nineveh and Cain's original city. Ellul has been influential in the non-French-speaking world, while Charbonneau has been more influential to French-speakers and served as an inspiration for French Green Party activists.

Two of Ellul's books, *The Technological Society* and *The Meaning of the City*, take a negative view of the city, which is explored below.[2] Ellul believes that both *technology*—which he defines as reductive rationality (reducing to mechanically manipulable factors that cannot be so reduced)—and *artificiality* destroy, eliminate, or subordinate the natural world. Ellul identifies these two motives in Cain, the first city-builder. Ellul sees the very concept of cities as an act of rebellion against God, who created human beings to live in natural environments, such as gardens or the countryside. According to Ellul, the story of the Tower of Babel exhibits two more features of technology—*monism* (seeking to standardize, control, and "flatten" everything rather than allow diversity) and *self-augmentation* (the idolization of growth and the impossibility of reversal). It is because Ellul believes cities to be wholly the result of sinful rebellion that he somewhat struggles with the fact that the final new heaven and new earth take the form of a city. Ellul concludes that the New Jerusalem must be a concession by God to deviate from his original plan for humanity. Ellul writes: "God in his love … takes into account man's will, takes into account his desires and his maddest intentions, understands his wildest revolts, takes into account all his endeavors."[3]

Ellul's negative assessment of modern technology should be read appreciatively. Although the majority of readers today believe he is overly pessimistic, his analysis is essential reading. He describes how technology turns efficiency and growth into idols, ends in themselves that sweep away any other values; and how technology's pursuit of these ends leads to reductionism, artificiality, and many other refusals to admit the "messiness" and uncontrollability of nature. Ellul rightly recognizes that cities not only tend to invent new technologies but also use them more than they are used in the country or village. And so his pessimism about technology significantly affects his attitude toward the city.

But his over-negativity about the city can't be supported exegetically. This is most clear when he is forced to surmise that God's final salvation for the human race gives them a city even though that wasn't his "best" goal for humankind. There is no indication in Scripture that our rebellion has marred our final salvation, or that God would let our sin mean that we don't receive a perfect world for human flourishing in the end. This over-negativity about the city shows an inability to distinguish between "structure" (the action or operation) and "direction" (the goal of the action or operation). City-building can be done for the glory of God or for the glory of man, as can

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[2] Jacques Ellul, *The Technological Society* (New York: Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group, 2021). Jacques Ellul, *The Meaning of the City* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2011).

[3] Ellul, *The Meaning of the City*, 174.

technological advances. For example, consider the technology that led to medical breakthroughs that have saved countless lives. Now, think of the technology that has made pornography completely pervasive. Ellul is important to read, but the rest of this paper will, I hope, take a more careful and balanced view of the city.

CITY DEFINITIONS

The Hebrew word for "city" in the Bible refers to a human settlement with a wall. Naturally, walled cities formed human settlements that were different from those without walls. What did the wall mean? It meant, first of all, density. People lived in much closer proximity to each other in order to fit within the wall. Ancient cities were as dense as modern ones even without having high-rise architecture, meaning street life and foot traffic were as great as they are in today's cities, or perhaps more so.

The wall also meant diversity because of the safety it provided. The city became a refuge for minorities and individuals who needed its security. It was also a place where a larger economic order could develop. Craftsmen had a much bigger market for their wares, attracting not just farmers or the dominant race or culture, but people of different vocations, lands, and people groups.

A city's wall also signified a unique, mixed usage of land. Rather than blocking off large areas specifically for one purpose, the city had residences, retail, workplaces, recreation, and education all in close proximity to each other—often on the same block.

Today, popular consensus defines cities as having the highest density of people per square mile, the most diversity of people, and the highest level of mixed land use and walkability. Suburbs are less dense, less diverse, and employ less mixed land use, so a car is often required. Small towns and rural areas are the least dense and least diverse living areas, where people often know each other and are not strangers. They can employ mixed land use to create a walkable town center, but a car is a necessity to get to any other location.

A BIBLICAL THEOLOGY OF THE CITY

As we look at the Bible's theology of the city, we will first read it diachronically, reading "along" with specific passages, instead of reading "across" and analyzing overarching themes.

BABEL AND THE CITY OF MAN

God puts mankind in the Garden of Eden to "work it and take care of it" (Genesis 2:15). This means they are to cultivate the ground like a gardener or farmer, not merely watch it like a park ranger. Human beings are to steward and manage all living things (Genesis 1:28).

Genesis 2 does not spell out what it means to "work" the creation. Nevertheless, we know that if human beings had stayed in the Garden of Eden, it would have been a place of safety and security, joyful work and the cultivation of new things that draw out all the potentialities of creation, and a place to meet with and grow in relationship with God.

However, when humans sin and are cast out of the Garden, they almost immediately begin to build cities. The first mention of a city in the Bible is Genesis 4:17, where Cain builds the city of Enoch, named after his son. Cain creates the city to assure his security by creating a fortified, walled settlement (Genesis 4:16–17). We also see that cities—humanity *en masse*—produce advances in civilization (Genesis 4:18–22), namely in the arts and technology.

There are two views of this passage. The first is that cities are the result of sin. After all, it is Cain the murderer who built the first city, and the first cities developed a culture of violence and oppression (Genesis 4:23–25). This view points out that cities were not built until after the Fall. Before that, we just had the country—the "garden." God invented the country, but sinful man invented the city.

The problems with this view, however, are many. Childbearing doesn't happen until after the Fall, but does that mean childbearing is evil? No. In fact, it was what God called humans to do (Genesis 1:26–28), and what they are expected to do after the Fall, albeit in a way marred by sin. In the same way, the call to work, cultivate, and have dominion over creation continues after the Fall.

The second view is that city-building is a way to work and cultivate creation. It intensifies the creative capacities of humanity. (If tying the command to work the Garden in Genesis 2:15 to city-building seems far-fetched, wait until we examine the book of Revelation below.) But in Cain's city, we do not see a God-glorifying culture growing. It is, as said above, one of violence and oppression. Thus, the earthly city is no longer a way to develop creation by establishing a God-glorifying civilization. Now, it is a magnifying glass that brings out both the best and the worst of humanity.

Urban life in the earlier pages of the Bible is cast in a negative light. Here are specific instances that show how living in cities can bring out the worst in humanity:

- The city of Cain, as described above, is built on a foundation of sin (Genesis 4).
- Lamech's evil song shows cities producing a culture of violence (Genesis 4:23–24).
- In the city of Babel, people build a tower—the first skyscraper—in order to make a name for themselves (Genesis 11). This highlights the urban temptation of self-glorification and the subsequent alienation of people groups that results.
- The cities of the plain—Sodom and Gomorrah—that Lot chooses to live in are destroyed for their wickedness (Genesis 19; Ezekiel 16:49). Lot's wife loses her life, and his daughter loses her faith in God. Meanwhile, Abraham chooses a rural, pastoral life and has a family that stays faithful. Abraham refuses to give gifts to or take gifts from the King of Sodom (Genesis 14). Instead of seeking his security and significance in a city like Cain,

Babel, or Lot, he "looked forward to the city which has foundations, whose builder and maker is God" (Hebrews 11:10).

- The Israelites are enslaved (Exodus 5:5–21) in order to build Egyptian cities. Here again we see human cities as centers of pride and power, building their prosperity and wealth on exploitation and enslavement.

Early in the Bible, we see a City of Man—a civilization raised for helping human beings seek their own glory rather than God's, a society based not on love and service but on power and self-aggrandizement. Christians with too romantic a view of cities need to see that it is virtually always true that unjust dynamics of power and oppression are at work in human cities.

JERUSALEM AND THE CITY OF GOD

This almost completely negative view of human cities begins to shift with the coming of the Israelites to the Promised Land. God knows that the Israelites will establish an agrarian culture upon entering the Promised Land, but he demands that they begin building cities as well. To begin, he commands them to build "cities of refuge" (Numbers 35; Deuteronomy 19:11–12), where people accused of a crime could flee from vigilantes and receive a fair trial. We see that cities—with their walls and gathered populations—were in positions to develop jurisprudence and execute laws in ways that rural areas could not. Cities with dense populations could and *had to* develop ways of adjudicating disputes without violence. These cities had the power to cultivate human civilization.

Both in the past and in the present, cities set the pace for humanity's cultural and civilizational development, for better and, so often, for worse. Theologian Geerhardus Vos wrote that the city, while an accumulator of the energy of culture, is also an accumulator of the potencies of evil.[4] The city aggregates people's talents in such a way that the greatest works of culture are produced. But it does the same thing with human sin. The city is a magnifying glass that brings out the best and worst in us.

The main way that the city's role in the Bible changes is in the establishment of Jerusalem. Genesis 11 shows that the City of Man is a place where people go to make a name for themselves, but in Deuteronomy 12, Moses speaks of a time in the future when God will choose a "place" in which his name will dwell. It will uniquely manifest his character and glory to the world. This place is said to be Jerusalem, where God's name dwells (1 Kings 14:21). The psalms give us a picture of Jerusalem as the ideal city of God. God himself builds it (Psalm 48:8). The nations come to Jerusalem because God's presence is there (Psalm 68:29). It is the joy of the whole earth—Jeru*shalom*, the city of shalom where human beings flourish spiritually, socially, physically, and economically because they live under the lordship of God. Deuteronomy 4:5–8 tells the Israelites that their obedience to God's law will produce a society of peace, righteousness, and justice that is a

[4] Geerhardus Vos, *Biblical Theology: Old and New Testaments* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2003).

witness to the nations. Jerusalem will then preeminently be the focal point of Israel's witness to the world. It is to be an urban culture reflecting the glory of God.

However, Jerusalem itself was still a very earthly city, which largely failed to reflect the love and righteousness of this intended City of God. Instead, it imitated the City of Man. Jeremiah points this out vividly (Jeremiah 13:9–14) and makes it clear that Jerusalem is only an imperfect sign pointing to a future, perfect City of God (Jeremiah 3:16–17).

When Israel goes into exile, the Jews are told to recognize that they are resident aliens of Babylon. They are to seek its shalom (Jeremiah 29:4–7), even though it will only be partial at best, since Babylon is the City of Man. They are not to attempt to turn Babylon into the City of God. Rather, they are to work for shalom where they live now and to look forward to a separate City of God that is to come one day. The prophets speak of this City of God as one that has the glory of God as its wall (Zechariah 2:4–5). Indeed, every pot in this New Jerusalem will be as holy to the Lord as the vessels in the temple now (Zechariah 14:20–21). This city will be a gigantic Holy of Holies—God will be in her midst (Ezekiel 48:35). By the time Israel is in exile, the prophets use the city as a major image of human evil (Isaiah 14:12), such that the City of Man is typified by the earthly Babylon (Isaiah 47; Jeremiah 50); but they also use the city as an image of godly society, such that Jerusalem typifies the heavenly city. In summary, the Bible does not view "the city" in purely rosy, positive terms or purely dark, negative terms.

JESUS, THE CITY, AND THE MISSION TO THE "CITY THAT IS"

When we get to the New Testament, the emphasis on the city is enriched and another dimension is added. Most of the action in the four Gospels and Acts happens in the cities of the Greco-Roman world.

Jesus ministered in the region of the "Decapolis," the ten, mainly Greek-speaking, Gentile-dominated cities to the east of the Sea of Galilee and the Jordan.[5] These were densely populated, ethnically diverse urban areas. At the end of his life, Jesus was put to death by those in the City of Man and its exploitative, violent pattern of urban social power. He was crucified "outside the city gate" (Hebrews 13:12), calling to mind the Old Testament practice of sending the impure and unclean outside the city as a sign of exile, punishment, or purification from sin (Leviticus 14:33–45; Numbers 5:1–4). What they didn't realize when they sent Jesus outside the city to die was that Jesus was taking *the city's sin* upon himself. As Hebrews 13:11–14 says:

> The high priest carries the blood of animals into the Most Holy Place as a sin offering, but the bodies are burned outside the camp. And so Jesus also suffered outside the city gate to make the people holy through his own blood. Let us, then, go to him

[5] Jesus' ministry in these places is spoken of or alluded to in Mark 5:20, 6:45, 7:31, and Matthew 4:25.

> outside the camp, bearing the disgrace he bore. For here we do not have an enduring city, but we are looking for the city that is to come.

In other words, Jesus lost the earthly city—was rejected and killed by the citizens of the City of Man—so we could become citizens of the City of God that is to come. Followers of Jesus now live in the overlap of these two cities. We inhabit our earthly city and seek its shalom (Jeremiah 29:4 and the book of Daniel). We are to live in our earthly cities by seeking the future city. In one sense, we have already come to it (Hebrews 12:22) and are already citizens of it (Philippians 3:20). Where the Spirit of God is present, that future city's love, peace, and justice is partially present. Yet it is not fully present, and we look forward to the city that God is preparing for us (Hebrews 11:10, 11:16, 13:14).

This creates a remarkable balance. Christians are not defeatists who retreat from cities or live in enclaves with no hope for their improvement. The early church was a mini-city inside the city (Matthew 5:14–16). It was a place where rich and poor sat down at the same table (1 Corinthians 11:18–22), where slaves, even runaways, were treated as brothers (Philemon 1:15–16; Colossians 4:1). And out in the city, the Christian attitude toward urban neighbors, even those of other religions and races, was to render costly, sacrificial, practical help (Luke 10:25–37; Acts 9:36). Luke 14 directs Christians to completely reject the culture's patronage system—of doing favors for those who have done favors for us—and to help those who cannot help us. In all these ways, the church was an alternate city within the city, and sought its shalom even as it understood that the present city would never be made into God's city by means of any social program.

Paul concentrated his church-planting ministry almost exclusively by working in the largest or most influential cities of a region (Acts 16:12). Paul's missionary journeys show an itinerary of going from one major city to another and ending with a trip to Rome. The *Dictionary of Biblical Imagery* states that "it is easy to see that the mission strategy of the early church was to evangelize the city. It is no exaggeration to say that in Acts the church is almost exclusively associated with the city."[6] The reasons for this are spelled out below. In brief, prominent cities were bridges to the entire region and often open to new ideas. Without changing the Old Testament's assessment of cities as mixtures of darkness and light, and by adopting the prophets' understanding of the City of Man and City of God, the New Testament put forth the city as preeminently a place of mission.

REVELATION AND THE CITY THAT IS TO COME

When we get to the book of Revelation, we see that although the Bible began in a garden, it ends in a city. God's future, redeemed world is depicted as a city. Abraham sought the city "whose architect and builder is God" (Hebrews 11:10), and Revelation 21 tells us that when God depicts the absolute apex of his redemption, he shows us this very city! His redemption is building us the New Jerusalem.

[6] James C. Wilhoit, Leland Ryken, and Tremper Longman III, *Dictionary of Biblical Imagery* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2010), 153.

When we look at this description of the New Jerusalem, we discover something very strange. In the midst of the city is a crystal river, and on each side of the river is the Tree of Life, bearing fruit and leaves that heal the nations of all their wounds and the effects of the divine covenant curse (Revelation 22:12–14). This city is the Garden of Eden remade. This city is the fulfillment of the purposes of the Eden of God.[7] From this vantage point, we can see that the cultural mandate in Genesis included city-building. As American theologian Meredith G. Kline says in *Kingdom Prologue*:

> The city is not to be regarded as an evil invention of ungodly fallen man. ... The ultimate goal set before humanity at the very beginning was that human-culture should take city-form ... there should be an urban structuring of human historical existence. ... The cultural mandate given at creation was a mandate to build the city. [After the Fall] the city is still a benefit, serving humankind as refuge from the howling wilderness condition into which the fallen human race, exiled from paradise, has been driven. ... The common grace city has remedial benefits [even] in a fallen world. It becomes the drawing together of resources, strength, and talent no longer just for mutual complementation in the task of developing the resources of the created world, but now a pooling of power for defense against attack, and as an administrative community of welfare for the relief of those destitute by reason of the cursing of the ground.[8]

It is widely understood that when God tells Adam and Eve to "rule over" and "fill the earth," (Genesis 1:26–28) he is directing them to build a God-honoring civilization. In no way does it mean to *be domineering* over creation. Rather, it means we are to bring forth the riches that God put into creation by developing science, art, architecture, and human society. Kline concludes that since Revelation reveals the "end" of creation (the climax of the work of the Second Adam, Jesus Christ) is a *city*, God was therefore calling Adam and Eve to be city-builders.

City-building is an ordinance of God, just like work and marriage. Indeed, cities draw together human talent and resources and tap the human potential for cultural development as nothing else does. God made the city to be a developmental tool, a form of cultural "gardening" designed to draw out the riches he put into the earth, nature, and the human soul at Creation. Even after the Fall, cities are places of common grace, though each factor God designed can also be used (and *is* used) for evil purposes. But in the end, no earthly city will become the City of God. Only Jesus, the Second Adam, the ultimate city-builder himself, can bring that about at the end of time. Notice how Scripture says the City of God *descends* from heaven. As the biblical

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[7] Biblically, "the city is the fulfiller of the paradise of God. ... This eschatological strand repeatedly ties the future of the city with the original, sinless past of Eden and its restoration in Christ. Even under the curse, man's cultural calling will be maintained." Harvie Conn, "Christ and the City: Biblical Themes for Building Urban Theology Models," in *Discipling the City: Theological Reflections On Urban Mission,* ed. Roger Greenway (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1979), 237. In other words, the Garden of Eden, had Adam not fallen, would have developed into a City, the city seen in Revelation 21. It would have been a perfect city under God. A city has the same three functions as the Garden of Eden. Originally, God built Eden as i) a place where humankind could garden, where they could cultivate the earth and "mine the cultural riches of creation," ii) a place where humankind could live, a place of safety and security, and iii) a place where humankind could meet God, where God dwelled in their midst.

[8] Meredith Kline, *Kingdom Prologue: Genesis Foundations for a Covenantal Worldview* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2006), 163.

narrative proceeds, a completely negative view of cities becomes one that is more mixed and nuanced, and then, at the book's culmination, one that is quite positive.

A SYSTEMATIC THEOLOGY OF THE CITY

As we look at the Bible's *systematic* theology of the city, we will read it synchronically, reading "across" all of its passages to analyze overarching themes instead of examining them one by one.

THE GOODNESS OF THE CITY (WITH SOME CAVEATS)

The city can be a place of refuge and safety. It has always been a place that harbors those too weak or unable to live in other places. In the earliest days, cities provided refuge from wild animals, marauding tribes, and criminals. When Israel moved into the Promised Land, the first cities in the land were built, at God's command, as "cities of refuge," where the accused could flee for safety and civil justice. Thus, God invented cities to be a sign of divine protection rather than self-protection.

Even today, people such as the homeless, new immigrants, or the poor often find refuge in the city. The city tends to be a more merciful place for minorities of all kinds. The density of the city creates the possibility of strong minority communities. Density creates diversity. Members of dominant majorities may have the luxury of disliking cities, but the weak and powerless often need them, as they cannot always survive in suburbs and small towns. Many middle-class families find it difficult to live in cities, and thus they often see cities as hostile places. But for other demographics (singles, the poor, ethnic minorities), the city has great advantages over non-urban areas. The refuge of the city *can* be misused, however, such as when people with sinful lifestyles find refuge in the city from the disapproval of broader culture.

The city can also be a center for cultural mining and development. Originally, God made the city to be a developmental tool, a form of cultural gardening designed to draw out the riches he put into the earth and the human soul at Creation. Even the description of the wicked city of Babylon shows the power of the city to draw out the resources of creation. In Revelation 18, we see the city as a place of music and the arts, crafts and manufacturing, trade and retail, technological advance, and the building of families. This is what God designed the city to be: an instrument to glorify him by "mining" the riches of creation and building a God-honoring civilization. The city's effect as a magnifying glass stems from this—because God invented it as a "cultural mine," it will naturally bring out whatever is in our human hearts. The density and diversity of the city bring out the best and the worst in us, in the following ways.

First, cities put us together with a number of unique people unlike ourselves. The city attracts the minorities of any society who can band together for mutual support—singles, the impoverished (and even the incredibly wealthy), immigrants, and ethnic groups. The city will always be the most diverse human-life structure. Because we are densely packed together with all of

these types of people, our ways of thinking and our views are radically challenged. We are confronted with creative new ways to think about things, forcing us to either abandon our traditional ways or become far more knowledgeable and committed to them than before. Thus, we become vastly more creative, committed, and skillful in all we do. But as we can well imagine, sin takes this divine strength—the diversity of the city—and turns it into a place of conflict and strife as well. Anyone who knows anything about the human race will tell you that these diverse people groups often find themselves at odds with each other. The gospel is required to resist the dark side of this gift.

Second, the city attracts the strongest as well as the weakest. The challenge of the city attracts the most talented, ambitious, and restless among us. No matter who you are, when you come to the city you are confronted by people who are far better than you at whatever you do. Because we are put together with extremely skilled people in our fields, we are radically challenged to do our very best. More than that, we likely feel driven and pressed to realize every ounce of our potential. Sin takes this divine strength—the culture-forming intensity of talented people working closely together—and adds to it both deadly hubris and burnout. Again, the gospel is required to resist these negative side effects.

All in all, it is quite wrong to see the city as intrinsically evil. It was designed by God to draw out what God made. Taking that into consideration, we should both appreciate the power within the concept of a city and realize the tremendous evil we can bring to it.

Third, the city is also a place to meet God. Ancient cities in particular were religious institutions often built around a *ziggurat*. Ziggurats (the original skyscrapers) were temples where a particular god was thought to come down from the heavens. Such cities were seen as the royal residences of those gods and had cults entirely dedicated to serving them. All of this was probably a twisted memory trace of the original design of God, namely that the Edenic city would be the place where God's presence would dwell inside his temple, allowing people to meet him. After Eden was (temporarily) lost to us through sin, God created a new city in the desert by dwelling among his people in the tabernacle. Around his tent was a city of tents. Later, the earthly city of Jerusalem became a sign to the future City of God. In Jerusalem, the temple God dwelled within stood as the central, integrating point of the city's architecture and the apex of its art, science, and technology. As a result, Jerusalem was "the joy of the whole earth" (Psalm 48:2). But she was only a symbolic foretaste of the heavenly City of God to come. Even now, believers await "the Jerusalem that is above," which is "free" (Galatians 4:26).

And today, even though many cities' attitudes toward religion have vastly changed, cities can still be religious hotbeds where people feel spiritually restless and seek divine answers. The density and diversity of the city—the same dynamics that produce cultural development—also make people feel spiritually off-balance. Cities, therefore, are crucial to evangelism in any area. Paul's missionary journeys essentially ignored the countryside. When he entered a new region, he planted churches in the biggest city and then left! The reasons for doing ministry in cities mirrors what we've seen about the nature of cities:

- **Cultural cruciality:** In the village, we might win one or two lawyers to Christ, for example, but if we want to win the legal *profession*, we need to go to cities that teach law and publish its journals.
- **Global cruciality:** Villages often only have a single people group. Cities allow us to spread the gospel to dozens of national groups, languages, and identities at once. Those in the city can be reached through the location's one *lingua franca*.
- **Personal cruciality:** In the village, little changes. People often live in very stable environments. Thus, they are suspicious of any major change. Because of the diverse, fast-paced nature of cities, urbanites are much more open to radically new ideas, such as the gospel. Because they are surrounded by so many people *like* and *unlike* themselves and are mobile and subject to change, they are far more open to conversion than any other kind of resident. Many even move to the city out of a desire to search for something bigger. The city can make even the most skeptical curious—it can make a person formerly hostile to the gospel willing to hear it out.

What was the result of Paul's strategy? There is a broad consensus that by 300 AD, about 10 percent of the Roman Empire was Christian. Not only that, but Christians were much more prevalent in cities than in the countryside. Some scholars claim Christians made up as much as 50 percent of the urban population, while over 90 percent of the countryside was still pagan. (It's worth noting that some believe the word "pagan" comes from the Greek word *paganus*, which indicates a farmer or man of the country.) Because Christianity took root in the cities, it eventually captured society, as is often the case. What captivates cities also captivates a civilization's art, media, scholarship, and professions. Cities are the culture-forming wombs of their society, and are made by God to be so.

THE FALLENNESS OF THE CITY

Just as cities can exhibit qualities of goodness, they can also exhibit consequences of our fallen sinfulness. For example:

Cities can create a place of racism, classism, and violence. Cities attract and sustain enormous race and cultural diversity, but human sin makes cities places of constant strife between groups. This can be seen perfectly in the description of Babel in Genesis 11. The city-builders specifically sought to build a place that would gather people for their own glory. (Many scholars say that Genesis 9 and 10 indicate that God *wanted* humans to spread out and form different cultures, and that as a result Babel may have been built in resistance to cultural diversity. See Vos for an example of this line of thinking.[9]) The result of Babel's sin was a confusion in which people could not communicate. Any efforts at unity based on common defiance of God resulted in nothing

[9] Vos, *Biblical Theology.*

but fragmentation and greater disunity. Today, cities built on the principles of human defiance of God and making a name for ourselves continue to find enormous strife, confusion, and violence between diverse groups of people.

Many people hate cities because of the diversity of cultures (those "not like us"), but we see in Genesis 10–11 that God enjoys and wills the diversity of cultures, as it brings forth the richness of his creation. Christians, too, should rejoice in this diversity while recognizing that they all stand judged by God's Word. Revelation 7 says the new heaven and new earth will be marked by people from "every nation, tribe, people, and language" (verse 9). Choosing to love the diversity of cities may be a good way to prepare for God's future.

Cities can become a refuge not from wilderness or persecution, but from God and his law. For example, people have gone to the city to engage in sexual practices prohibited by the society outside it. Cities inherently have a natural tolerance of diversity, which can be twisted to form a place where anything goes and where people create their own moralities.

Cities can create a place of pride, arrogance, excess, overwork, and exhaustion. Again, we see this evidenced in the quintessential City of Man, Babel, which aimed to build "a tower that reaches to the heavens, so that we may make a name for ourselves; otherwise we will be scattered over the face of the whole earth" (Genesis 11:4). This first skyscraper is built in clear defiance of God. The original mandate of God to humankind was to turn the natural resources of the physical universe and the personal resources of their own creation to the image of God. They were to develop science, art, and civics that glorified God as their source and foundation. Now, we have cities dedicated to mining cultural riches for our own glory as a way to show independence from God.

The human heart is made in the image of God and yet fell into total depravity. As a result our art, science, technology, and education exemplify both goodness and badness. We can all feel it. Nothing challenges and presses us toward excellence like living in the city. But we know that this desire has become tainted, idolatrous, and exhausting. Making a name for ourselves is a spirituality of darkness, and it is a significant motivation for countless people moving to the city.

Cities can become a hotbed of cults and false belief. Cities are inherently religious. Every city is dedicated to a god, even if it is a secular one like wealth, political power, or sexual expression. Christian churches in cities could ordinarily be found with the best ministries, theological resources, and teaching—until recently, that is. Protestant Christians abandoning the city inevitably made it easier for it to turn to false saviors. Because God invented cities to be religious centers, human idolatries are enhanced in the city. It is not surprising that cities were the places that the "new" ideas of the Enlightenment first took root and irreligion first became rampant in Western society. Cities are always ahead of the curve. But it stands to reason that these would be the first places that secular people who are steeped in the unbelief of their culture would be the most open to Christianity as a *new* idea. Cities are uniquely positioned to be the place where a new vision of Christianity can take shape and begin to capture a culture's imagination.

THE IMPORTANCE OF CITIES

THE IMPORTANCE OF CITIES TO THE HUMAN RACE

Cities are not a sociological accident, a natural evolutionary development, an evil imposition, or a merely human creation. They are a way for human beings to carry out God's original mandate to create civilization, to use their gifts to draw out the good, God-glorifying aspects of creation in all we do. They are places of refuge for the powerless as well as a "field of dreams" for those who have great new ideas. The city is a gift of common grace—something God gives to all human beings. In *Urban Ministry*, Harvie Conn writes:

> Cities are not fully integrated and utterly coherent. They are an aggregate of accumulated traits and habits, shaped by time and history, constantly subject to change and modification … Molded by sin and sometimes by righteousness, cities form a totality of interweaving systems and subsystems, sometimes self-correcting, sometimes self-destructing. They are also provisions of God's common grace. Through them God restrains the development of evil, blesses his fallen creatures and works out his sovereign purposes in both judgment and grace. The city is an instrument of God's preserving and preventative grace and an exposition of our creaturely response to that grace.[10]

THE IMPORTANCE OF MISSION TO CITIES

There is no direct prescription telling Christians to give priority to the city in mission. But perhaps approaching the matter from that perspective is to bark up the wrong tree. Do we prioritize planting churches in Asia over Antarctica? Yes, but obviously not because the Bible tells us to prioritize Asia. It tells us to prioritize *people*. We are to make disciples of all nations. And if we prioritize people, we will have to see the city as a key mission field for reaching the whole human race. Today, 50 percent of the world's population is in cities, and that number is heading toward 80 percent.[11] Human cultures generally tend to develop based on the principles and values of their cities. If we want to reach people and have any influence on how humans live together, we must pursue mission in cities. (A note: there is no direct, biblical statement that God will providentially, eventually move most human beings into cities. But in light of all we have read in the Bible, the idea should not surprise us.)

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[10] Harvie Conn and Manuel Ortiz, *Urban Ministry: The Kingdom, the City, & the People of God* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2010), 192.

[11] "This chart shows the impact rising urbanization will have on the world," World Economic Forum, April 26, 2022, https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2022/04/global-urbanization-material-consumption (accessed April 28, 2023).

THE IMPORTANCE OF THE RIGHT ATTITUDE TOWARD CITIES

In every earthly city, there are two kingdoms present, two cities vying for control. They are the City of Man and the City of God, and they are in tension (sometimes direct conflict) with each other. The City of Man deifies power, wealth, and the act of creating human culture in itself. The City of God is marked by shalom, God's peace; a place where stewardship of God's creation, justice, compassion, and righteousness leads to harmony, developing families, and building a culture under God.

Christians must also see that the two cities are battling in every earthly city to some degree. Christians are to see the earthly city as something to love and to win. They are to win it by seeking its shalom (Jeremiah 29), and to spread the life of the City of God in it by converting and discipling people as well as seeking justice and mercy within its communities.

There are three basic attitudes toward the city Christians should avoid:

- **Disdaining the city:** This attitude despises cities as evil and sees the church as a fortress against them. It tends to forget that the New Jerusalem will be a city.
- **Romanticizing the city:** This attitude believes that the church should *be* the city in that it acts as a mirror that simply reflects its values. It tends to forget the utter level of fallenness we see in cities such as Babel (Babylon).
- **Being indifferent toward the city:** This attitude may view the city as a place to have fun or advance a career, but it does not recognize the city as a spiritual battleground where the church is called to engage in substantial mission.

In contrast to these, the gospel's view of the city brings balance. In this view, the church acts as leaven, appreciating the good aspects of the city, serving people by word and deed to renew the city and bring shalom, and providing an example of the hope, peace, and goodness that a godly life can bring. Any theological model of the city will fail if one or more of these points is neglected, omitted, or over-emphasized. This is a matter of huge practical importance. Leaders of urban churches must teach and guide church members into biblical attitudes toward the city in which they live. This teaching can have an enormous influence in shaping how Christians relate to cities (as despisers, as mirrors of it, as consumers, or as servants). It affects how long they stay in cities and how they spend their time in them.

THE IMPORTANCE OF LIVING AS EXILES IN CITIES

As we have seen, Israel's years of exile in Babylon give us the most information about how Christians are to live in cities. Today, all believers must still be seen as exiles (1 Peter 1:1; James 1:1). What does this mean? It means we must not think we can bring the actual City of God to our city (creating a utopia). But it also means we must not think we cannot bring some shalom to it at all. It means to be a city *inside* a city, as it were, or an embassy or colony of heaven (Philippians

3:20). It means we are not to avoid cities nor to rest our hearts or identities in them. And it means we are to look to the exiled Israelites for guidance on how we are to live in and relate to cities.

Urban pioneer and pastor Raymond J. Bakke speaks of the following exilic figures and applies their work to the kinds of ministries an urban church needs to pursue:

- **Word:** Ezra recovered God's Word for the people. This involves preaching, discipling, teaching, and evangelizing a contextualized gospel that speaks to the concerns and capacities of city-dwellers.
- **Deed:** Nehemiah made the city safe and functional. This involves seeking mercy and justice and a holistic ministry that advocates safe streets, good jobs, decent housing, and good schools.
- **Work:** Esther rose high in the pagan society, then used her position to work for justice in society and for her people (at great risk). A key part of city ministry is to equip Christians to work distinctively as Christians in their vocation.
- **Community:** Jeremiah wrote a letter (chapter 29) telling the exiles to neither assimilate nor separate but to live out their lives as a community, to "seek the peace and prosperity of the city" (verse 7). We are to not only be witnesses by our individual lives but also by the beauty of our communal life together. This includes being generous with money, living a simple life, loving others despite cultural barriers such as class and race, and men and women showing one another great respect.[12]

THE REWARDS OF CITY MINISTRY

My last note must be a note of hope and joy. Yes, city ministry is more complicated than any other in many ways. It is more complicated, for example, to preach a sermon to a congregation consisting of five different cultural groups than one that is culturally homogenous. And yet the promise of Ephesians 2:11–20 says that the gospel can overcome racial barriers like nothing else can—and this can often be realized in the city more readily than homogenous towns.

God's question to Jonah in Jonah 4:11 includes, "And should I not have concern for the great city of Nineveh, in which there are more than a hundred and twenty thousand people …?" God's challenge is, of course, a rebuke to Jonah, but it is also a promise and a word of hope. He says, "Should *I* not have concern for the great city?" God says that *he* loves the city, *he* is concerned for it, and *he* calls Jonah to join him. Not all Christians are called to minister and live in cities—but for those of us who are called, we can be confident that God goes before us.

[12] The first three ministry methods are taken from Raymond J. Bakke, *A Theology as Big as the City* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2009).

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PART TEN

City Theory

This paper contains material on city theory that is largely missing from *Center Church*.[1] It interacts with contemporary urban theories that animate a great deal of social policy and development in cities around the world. It also looks at urban trends and predictions and considers Christian responses to them.

One note before we proceed: the majority of social science research and reflection on urban areas has focused on cities in the West. The new cities of the Global East and South are vastly under-researched. I've tried to keep the Western-centric nature of city theory in mind while writing this, but some of my summaries below may not apply to non-Western cities as much as they do to others. City to City looks forward to continuing dialogue with global leaders to learn how urban planning and renewal takes place in their countries.

CITY TRENDS[2]

ENORMOUS GROWTH OF CITIES

From the mid-1700s until the mid-1900s, there was explosive growth in Western cities. The age of industrialization moved most jobs into cities. Over a period of 150 years, Western countries went from 20 percent of their population living in urban cities to over 75 percent living in them. Even today, cities in the Western world continue to grow steadily, though usually not explosively. For example, the 2020 U.S. census showed that over the past decade, one half of all U.S. counties had a decrease in their populations, whereas 80 percent of all cities had an increase.

In 1950, 30 percent of Latin America's population lived in cities. Now, 80 percent live in them, essentially catching up with the West in terms of urbanization. Asia and Africa have less urbanized populations. Various studies differ, but most seem to claim Asia has a 55 percent urban population and Africa has a 43 percent urban population. This would make Africa the least urbanized continent, but its overall population is growing more rapidly than any other continent's. Most projections predict that Asia and Africa will eventually join the other continents in having a population distribution that is 75 percent urban and 25 percent rural.

[1] Timothy Keller, *Center Church: Doing Balanced, Gospel-Centered Ministry in Your City* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2012).

[2] Sources: Patrick Condon, *5 Rules for Tomorrow's Cities* (Washington, D.C.: Island Press, 2019); Edward Glaesar, *The Triumph of the City* (London: Pan Macmillan, 2012); Edward Glaeser and David Cutler, *Survival of the City: Living and Thriving in an Age of Isolation* (London: Penguin, 2021); Michael Batty, *Inventing Future Cities* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2018).

Each month, 5 to 6 million people move into cities across the whole world. In *5 Rules for Tomorrow's Cities*, Patrick Condon explains that this urbanization of the planet will eventually stabilize. In the West and Latin America, urbanization is steady but stabilizing. Now, most urban growth will happen in Asia and lastly in Africa. Just over 50 percent of the world's population now lives in cities, and some analysts estimate that by 2100, more than 80 percent of the world's population will inhabit them.

How should our ministry respond to this trend? The people of the world are going into cities faster than the church is. We need far more churches in the cities of the world. Throughout the rest of this century, we will need urban evangelism, urban ministry workers, and urban church planters—in droves.

The fact is that the biggest cities of the world will continue to grow even as our ability to communicate and work from a distance increases. The continued growth of cities in spite of technology has led American economist Edward Glaeser and British urban planner Michael Batty to speak of "the paradox of the modern metropolis"—namely, that physical proximity is becoming *more* important as we become increasingly accustomed to connecting over distances online. This paradox should not be surprising. From a purely scientific point of view, we need face-to-face relationships. We need touch; we need embrace. From a Christian point of view, human beings are souls created for bodies (2 Corinthians 5:1–4). We were created to have bodies eternally. In a world where many of our interactions are non-physical, our sense of place is likely to become increasingly important.

GREATER CONNECTION BETWEEN CITIES

Despite the results of the COVID-19 pandemic, the process through which the great global cities interconnect and virtually merge into each other is likely to continue. City centers will especially be populated by people who have gone to the same schools, work for the same companies, have many of the same (Western, individualistic) beliefs, use the same technology, and travel back and forth to each other. The increasing ability to work from anywhere will enable people in the great global cities to be more connected than ever, and so this trend of global connection between great cities will continue.

As City to City was formed, we recognized that global cities are becoming more alike, and thus we believe there is overlap between effective ministry in one city and effective ministry in other cities. Because of this, we can learn from each other now and will be able to do so even more in the coming years.

GREATER COMPLEXITY OF CITIES

For centuries, most cities have been based on a single model: that the greatest density of population is where there is a combination of workplace, residence, government, and culture institutions,

and from this densely populated nucleus radiate other neighborhoods and settlements, some less dense and some more, some more prosperous and some less. But the future indicates that many factors will lead to cities developing more complex forms. Modern life and technology empower people to self-organize, making it more and more difficult to plan cities in a top-down, centralized way. It is likely that city growth will increasingly be bottom-up, spontaneous, and unpredictable. There will be, at the very least, multi-nucleated cities and supposed suburbs that take on more urban characteristics. Cities will become more complicated and more unpredictable.

In response to this, Christians must become students of their cities. We cannot merely love our city—we must learn it. We need to study not only the changes in our cities in neighborhoods but also where these changes come from and the methods used to make them happen.

DECLINING BIRTH RATES

The basic trend across all continents is that the more people live in cities, the lower the birth rate is. Urban living makes having children more expensive and more complex. With the likely exception of Africa, most countries will stop growing by 2060 largely because the birthrate will dip under the replacement rate (2.1 children per couple) across the world. However, birthrates will not fall uniformly. If current trends continue, the world will become increasingly multiethnic, as birth rates among non-white, non-Western populations outpace Western ones. In general, this means that secularism will not continue to increase indefinitely since non-white, non-Western people tend to be less individualistic and less fully secular.

Pressures in cities—such as higher costs, less space, and a rapidly changing culture—push many urban dwellers away from establishing families, but many still desire them. Urban churches can be an important way to support the establishment of marriages and families. And it is possible that Christians in cities could have higher birth rates than average due to those family-supportive environments. But at the same time, there will be far more adults living their lives as singles. Single living has its own pressures and challenges, but again urban churches can become true extended families for singles. The church has the remarkable ability to be a family that unites biological families with singles in one spiritual family.

ECONOMIC INEQUALITY AND A SHRINKING MIDDLE CLASS

Globalization has given corporations a power over labor that it has not had in centuries. First, there is a "winner takes all" pattern that has developed since the entire world is now one unified, global market. Second, labor costs are lowered through jobs outsourced to poorly paid workers in other countries or by employing local immigrants willing to work for low wages. Third, full-time employees who have benefits are being replaced with part-time contractors who have lower wages and no benefits, or with automated processes that eliminate the need for an employee altogether. Thus, we see the shrinkage of the middle class.

While this thesis is contested and discussion about it should continue, it still seems to be the case that there is a relative decline in income and capital for the bottom 80–90 percent of the population. Condon points out that a declining birthrate contributes to this: having fewer workers overall creates less wealth and puts existing wealth in fewer hands. Condon also points out this growing inequality is creating a shortage of housing, particularly in Western cities.[3] The poor often object to new housing in their neighborhood, fearing that property values will increase, and they will no longer be able to afford the increased housing costs. Wealthy residents often use such people as allies because it suits their agenda of keeping new development out of their neighborhoods. But in the long term, without new housing, housing costs across the whole city increase; and the poor who initially objected to new housing will find themselves homeless.

The great cities of the world will be increasingly unequal. Churches reaching professional classes and those reaching working classes must unite to share resources within the Christian community and out in the neighborhoods. We must train Christians to work for justice.

URBAN THEORY[4]

The field of urban theory is enormous and complex. It seeks to understand cities with a theory of change that explains the social, political, economic, and other human processes that form cities and the people within them. In other words, how do social bonds develop between people of different cultural backgrounds in cities? How do identities of class, gender, caste, and race change in cities? How do religion, business, politics, and culture change in the city? What are the operative principles and mechanisms that explain how cities grow, develop, and change?

In order for Christians to help cities grow and change for the better, we must search for the answers to these questions and more. How should we expand old cities and develop new ones? How should cities be laid out spatially and use their land? What is the relationship between cities and the regions around them? How do economies work best in cities? Assessing issues such as these informs us so that we can begin to fix cities where they need to be fixed—for example, diminishing urban ills such as congestion, pollution, poverty, and crime.

It may be helpful for those wanting to change their cities to be aware of some prevailing schools of urban thought. Each of these schools offers a unique understanding of cities, and it is not uncommon for modern narratives about the nature of cities to fit into one of these categories. Each of these ways of thinking has a certain degree of insight that Christians can affirm, but also conclusions that can be clarified and corrected by the gospel. Being familiar

[3] Condon, *5 Rules for Tomorrow's Cities*, 12.

[4] Sources: Jane Jacobs, *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*, Modern Library Edition (New York: Vintage Books, 1993); Daniel J. Monti, Michael Ian Borer, Lyn C. MacGregor, *Urban People and Places: The Sociology of Cities, Suburbs, and Towns* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 2015); Condon, *5 Rules for Tomorrow's Cities*; Harvie M. Conn, *A Clarified Vision for Urban Mission* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1987); Harvie M. Conn, "Part 3: Understanding the City" in Harvie M. Conn and Manuel Ortiz, *Urban Ministry: The Kingdom, the City, and the People of God* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2001); Michael Batty, *Inventing Future Cities*.

with them will also help us in discussions with non-Christians about how to best view the city and aim to change it.

THE CHICAGO SCHOOL: CITY AS A PLACE DESTRUCTIVE OF COMMUNITY

German sociologist Ferdinand Tönnies spoke of rural *Gemeinschaft* (a community in which the group is more important than the individual and the main dynamic is service to others) and *Gesellschaft* (a society in which the individual is more important than the group, and the main dynamic is personal advancement at the expense of others).[5] Georg Simmel, another German sociologist, followed by arguing that the city creates a more calculating and rational mindset, a thinning out of relationships, a loss of the sense of common good, and a dog-eat-dog environment in which competition dominates.[6]

Building on these ideas was the so-called Chicago School of Urban Theory led by American sociologist Louis Wirth. Wirth defined the city in terms of size, density, and heterogeneity (diversity).[7] This definition has rightly stuck. But Wirth followed the earlier thinkers by teaching that cities necessarily erode human community and relativize moral norms. Family, religion, and morality all become less important in the city than they are in the country and town. Neighborhoods become less cohesive and experience "social disorganization," which results in things such as crime, pollution, and poverty. In this view, cities are bad, and the country is good. The larger cities get, the more disorganized society becomes, and so cities will eventually stop growing. This urban theory's vision for improving cities is to make them less like cities—to change the way space is used in the city so that it is more like a suburb. For example, the influential urban planner Robert Moses' vision of a city was made for the car, filled with freeways, large housing projects, and massive open spaces. All of this thinking emerged from the Chicago School.

Subsequent scholarship and research have significantly critiqued and modified this view. One rebuttal proposes that many cities are actually more religious than the countryside or small towns that surround them. See, for example, London, England, where more people attend church than anywhere else in the rest of Britain.[8] Author Jane Jacobs made it her life's work to oppose this school's negative view of the city and its effort to "de-citify" cities by trying to reduce their density.[9] As is often the case, there is obviously some truth to the logic of this school that is overlooked in the scholarly world and overemphasized by much of American evangelicalism. But it is important to remember that, biblically, sin is universal and will manifest itself in any human social

[5] Ferdinand Tönnies, *Community and Society* (Mineola, NY: Dover Publications, 2002).

[6] Georg Simmel, "The Metropolis and Mental Life," 1903, http://www.osea-cite.org/tourismworkshop/resources/Simmel_Metropolis_Mental_Life.pdf.

[7] Louis Wirth, "Urbanism as a Way of Life," *The American Journal of Sociology*, Vol. 44, No. 1 (1938).

[8] Harriet Sherwood, "London More Religious Than Rest of Britain, Report Finds," *The Guardian*, June 24, 2020, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/jun/24/london-more-religious-than-rest-britain-report-finds.

[9] See her book *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* for more details.

arrangement, even if it surfaces in different ways. To demonize cities and to idolize rural towns is indeed to err. Only God's grace is salvific, and only human sin is the cause of our problems. As we read in the last paper, the city contains both the blessings of common grace and the curses of evil, because human beings contain both.

THE CRITICAL URBAN THEORY SCHOOL: CITY AS A PROCESS PRODUCED BY THOSE IN POWER

Neo-Marxist scholars have argued that cities have historically been—and still are—places created by those with wealth in order to advantage themselves. Contrary to the Chicago School, economics are what make a city a city, not culture. A city is a process by which the owners of the means of production force people to live and work in a way that produces wealth for those at the top. The social processes of industrialization, individualization, globalization, bureaucratization, and "marketization" (monetizing things that were done informally in the past)—all things that make cities more efficient producers of wealth—turn city-dwellers into cogs in the capitalist machine.

Again, there is some truth to this view, and it was Critical Urban Theory that gave far more attention to racial dynamics within the city than the other schools, as well as to the structures that trap families in poverty. In some ways, this theory holds an even more negative view of the city than the Chicago School. It does, however, have a less negative view of poorer neighborhoods. Unlike the Chicago School, it does not see the city as a natural development but as something completely created and imposed on people from above. This view is still strong in the academy (along with other neo-Marxist critical theories), but its critics rightly question its wholly negative view of the city—especially the idea that city-dwellers have no agency, form nothing on their own, and act strictly as unwitting pawns of capitalists. It overlooks the ways in which city residents—especially immigrants—do take some control and use the city for their own good ends. Most in this school tend to deny that cities have any unique culture to them, which makes it hard to even define what cities are, let alone study them.

Biblically, sin is universal. Not only are the rich sinful, but so are the poor. With a biblical doctrine of sin, we cannot demonize cities nor demonize capitalists, nor see anything but Christ as the Savior. But the Bible frequently speaks against injustice toward the poor, and much of this school's concerns for the powerless should be shared by Christians. This school's vision for improving cities is to give governments a heavy set of regulatory powers, especially against businesses. Politicians in this school raise taxes and regulations on the wealthy and on business owners, usually taking an adversarial stance toward them. However, this erodes the tax base, driving businesses out and leaving cities poorer than before. The good fruit of this school is that it highlights unjust social structures in cities. The downside is that this becomes the *only* lens through which to view cities, and this can lead to knee-jerk anti-development mindsets that, ironically, can produce higher housing costs for the poor and the inability to improve public schools, policing, or societal wellbeing at all.

THE LOS ANGELES POSTMODERN SCHOOL: CITY AS AN EXPERIENCE AND A PLACE OF FRACTURE

The Los Angeles Postmodern School sees the city of today as a place of consumption, stimulation, and spectacle. Los Angeles is the quintessential postmodern city because it has no center and no clear borders. It is not a place of coherence but of fragmentation. This school of thought is influential for the moment, but it is almost deliberately difficult to pin down. It is truly postmodern in that it does not want to say that the city is any clear, simple, identifiable thing. It does not trust businesses, private enterprises, or government. It does not believe cities can be planned but that they should be allowed to grow and change spontaneously. It appreciates the city's diversity, the wild pastiche of such different people, and its uncontrollable nature—the adventure of living there. Like the Chicago School, it sees cities as places where individuals are free from community, but this view considers this to be a positive factor. On the other hand, it knows the uncontrollable nature of the city can lead to poverty, violence, injustice, and isolation. It, too, sees the city as the result of those in power, but it proposes no measures for change. Advocates of this view are more like Foucault than Marx. They are "Marxists without the revolution."[10]

It is hard to know whether this view is really a "school" or just a mood. And while it is not influential academically (it does not dominate whole university departments), it is important *culturally*. Many people in the city adopt this view out of cynicism. Practically, they do not trust big governments, but they also don't trust developers and corporations. They trust neither tenants nor landlords, neither unions nor businesses. They tend to help cities not so much with grand new plans, but by trying to balance out power and in not allowing any one group (business, government, police, the poor) to have the upper hand. They are usually anti-development.

Philosophically, there are problems with this view. It wants freedom, and it counsels that, but in the end, how is this not a counsel of hopelessness? Why is freedom of the individual even considered to be good in the first place? What is the basis for that moral view in light of all the relativism it espouses? However, biblically, Christians can find good even in this viewpoint because it seems to be the only school that doesn't valorize any factor and, along with Paul, sees that "there is no one righteous—not even one" (Romans 3:10). It doesn't turn to government or suburban space or entrepreneurship as a savior. We should eschew grand schemes such as these that think they can solve urban problems. In this, Christians can agree.

THE URBAN CULTURALIST SCHOOL

This school has the most positive view of the city, seeing it as a place for people to pursue meaning and wellbeing as they discover and forge new identities. People come to cities to create an environment in which these things can be accomplished. In the process of developing

[10] Monti et al., *Urban People and Places*, 93.

a unique culture, cities become places that produce culture for the rest of society. There are many reasons for this. One is the agglomeration of talent. Another is the relative lack of formal and informal barriers to competition in industries. For example, in a small town, a new business needs to go through gatekeepers; not so in cities. In essence, "the city is viewed as a collective accomplishment."[11] American sociologist and economist Richard Florida's 2002 book *The Rise of the Creative Class* was crucial to the development of this view of things.[12] The creative class—center-city entrepreneurs, innovators, business owners, and white-collar workers—are socially liberal in their lifestyle and yet economically conservative in that they are pro-business and pro-entrepreneurship. They are seen as the main engine for creating social and economic vitality in modern cities.

We have to see this view's similarities with one in Genesis 11—that of the people who come to the city to "make a name [or identity] for [them]selves" (verse 4) through entrepreneurship (constructing the Tower of Babel). There is much truth to this school, however. Studies of cities around the world show that this engine of entrepreneurship is not only present in professional, white-collar center-cities. Even in poorer neighborhoods, residents generate small, informal or formal new businesses. Biblically, this view resonates with Christians because it speaks of the city's ability to create culture. But, like other views, it leaves out part of the truth. Critical theorists are right that the city is *also* a place controlled by the powerful for their own benefit. So, cities are *both* culture-producing and yet somewhat controlled by the cultural powers that be.

A SUMMARY OF SCHOOLS

The Chicago School says the growth of cities is part of natural human evolution. People seek cities to compete for scarce resources and jobs. Immigrants amass in cities to survive. But cities lead to social disorganization, a weakening of social bonds, because people are transient and relationships are superficial. Cities lead to loneliness, poverty, crime, and the breakdown of family, church, and community. Cities can't change fundamentally, but we can make improvements. This view looks to significant urban-planning projects for solutions.

The Critical Urban Theory School says cities are created by those who control wealth. Cities are not formed naturally but rather are imposed on us by the powerful for their own advantage. People do not create cities—economic and wealth interests create the urban culture. Cities will be places of inequality unless activism and government disrupt "natural" urban processes like gentrification. By this logic, we must not let cities "be themselves." This view looks to the government for solutions.

The Los Angeles School says cities are mirrors of fragmented human nature. They are indeed disorganized places, and no one has a solution on how to piece broken cities back together.

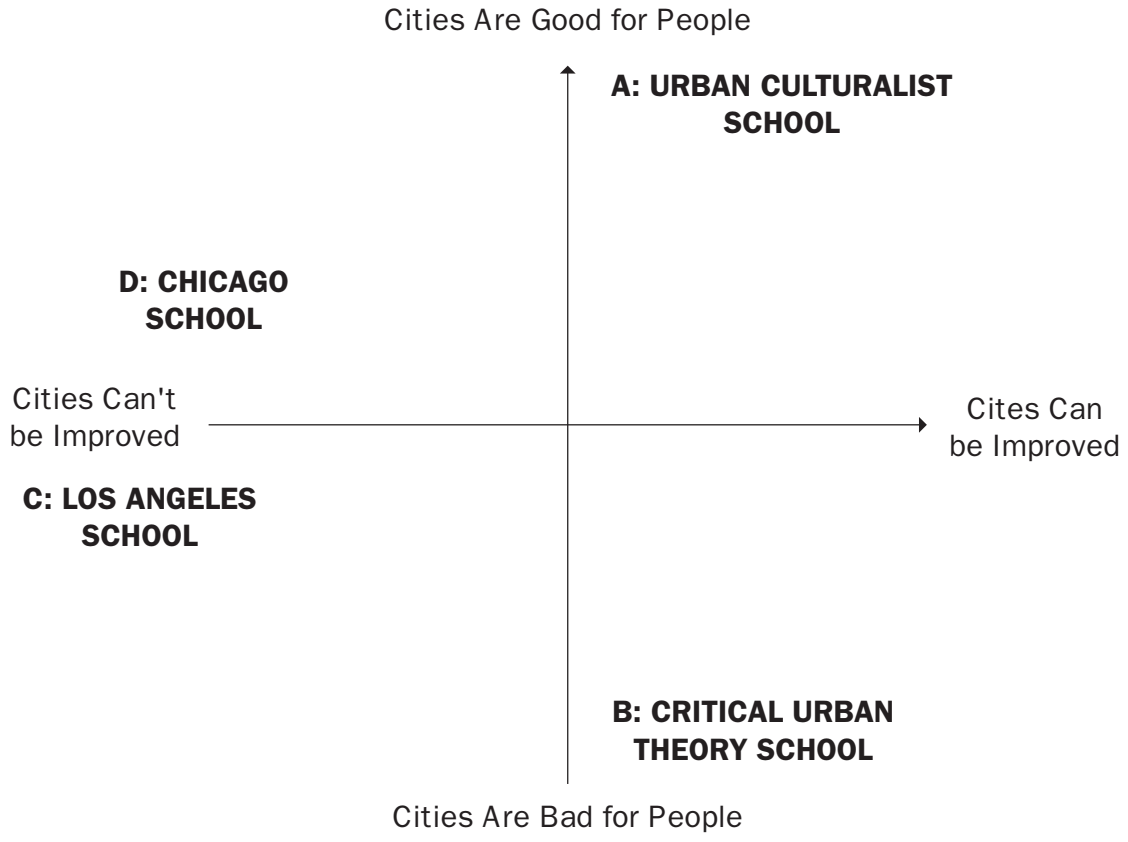
[11] Monti et al., *Urban People and Places*, 94.

[12] Richard Florida, *The Rise of the Creative Class* (New York: Basic Books, 2002).

Racism and tribalism can actually grow, not diminish, through proximity to people who are different. Efforts to overcome poverty can create dependency on others and even deeper poverty. The only way forward is to eschew meta-narratives in the form of grand schemes of urban salvation. This is the view of many who don't care about urban problems and simply use the city for their own ends. It looks to nothing for solutions.

The Urban Culturalist School says cities are created by those who want to live in them. They want the density and diversity, the close proximity of those who are both similar and dissimilar. They want the unique culture of cities and the creativity that comes from this density and diversity. By that logic, we should simply let cities be themselves and let people create cities as they create themselves. It is the city's unique culture that grows a city. The view exemplifies the romanticism of many center-city young professionals and looks to business for solutions.

We can graph the schools on axes based on two questions: 1) Are cities mainly good for people's social, personal, and economic lives, or are they bad? 2) Can we improve and change cities, or are they unchangeable?



A: Most positive/activist: Urban Culturalist School
B: Most negative/activist: Critical Urban Theory School
C: Least negative/passivist: Los Angeles School
D: Least positive/passivist: Chicago School

To readers outside of North America, do you perceive any of these urban theory schools to be influential in your parts of the world? Are there other schools of thought in your regions?

A CHRISTIAN RESPONSE TO UNDERSTANDING CITIES

Each of the schools of thought have strengths and weaknesses, but none seem to capture the true complexity of cities. It is helpful to remember that cities are much more like living organisms than mechanisms. Mechanisms are the sum of their parts. They can be taken apart and reassembled. But when an organism's systems are all operating, it can exhibit qualities *greater* than the sum of its parts. A living organism cannot be taken apart and reassembled in such a manner that it will still live. We do not know how consciousness can arise from the chemical components of a brain. Similarly, cities exhibit "emergent behavior." Emergent behavior is the behavior of a system that occurs only when its individual parts interact with each other and other outside influences. As author and professor of economics Sanford Ikeda says:

> What I consider to be Jacobs's most important insight, not just for economics but social theory in general … is introduced in the final chapter of *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* and carried over into the first chapter of *The Economy of Cities*: The living city is an emergent order that results from the unintended consequences of the activities of purposeful individuals. That is, the kind of social order that generates a living city, the basis for innovation and economic development, is an unplanned, spontaneous order.[13]

Governments and urban planners have idealized the highly planned city, and they are not completely wrong. Those who hold views in keeping with the Los Angeles School, that nothing about cities can be controlled or planned, should look at cities such as Singapore, where strong government involvement has created both functionality and beauty.

Michael Batty argues Jacobs was most right when she showed how cities are maintained and changed by systems, most of which are self-organizing and unplanned by government, planners, or developers. Indeed, many come from people with power and wealth (as the Critical Urban School attests), but many also come from the bottom-up, established by innumerable different combinations of individuals. Some of these systems are broadly beneficial to many or most people living in cities, and others are not. Jacobs therefore pushes back against the Chicago School's dislike of density *and* the Los Angeles School's characterization of the city as chaotic. She would say that the city self-organizes in an enormous number of ways and does

[13] Sanford Ikeda, "The Economy of Cities: Jane Jacobs's Overlooked Economic Classic," *The Independent Review*, 24, no. 4 (2020): 617, https://www.jstor.org/stable/48583526.

it best when there's density. The way it organizes itself is not neatly, predominantly driven by people with wealth or entrepreneurs.

I propose that there are theological reasons for favoring Jacobs and Batty's view of how cities work. As we saw in the previous paper, "City Theology," the development of cities was something that grew organically out of God's mandate to human beings to cultivate creation. Human beings build cities as part of our created propensity to build civilization. We can't go as far as to say that God created the city in the same way he instituted marriage. There's no equivalent of Genesis 2:24 for cities. And yet the fact that the final human society in Revelation is a city points toward the belief that cities are not an aberration but an outgrowth of God's purposes for humanity and human flourishing. The impulse for city-building is something God instilled in humanity, and therefore we should not be surprised to see that the city is something extraordinarily complex, a kind of organism, not something that can be controlled or eliminated by any one party or force without harming or killing it.

HOW TO BUILD CITIES

It was mentioned in the previous section that a city is like a living thing with the power to generate itself in innumerable self-organizing, bottom-up ways. A question then arises: if that is the case, is there anything we can do to ignite and stimulate city growth in good ways?

The answer, at least in some part, has to do with density and land use. The first big conflict in North America over urban planning and theory was the clash between Robert Moses and Jane Jacobs over the development of New York City. Moses followed the Chicago School's ideas, such as the "City Beautiful," "Garden City," and the "Radiant City."[14] These approaches essentially sought to depopulate city centers with both major highways (which displaced neighborhoods and facilitated suburban sprawl) and to make cities more like suburbs with uniform zoning (placing businesses all in one place, residences in another, and so on) through heavy government control.

Jacobs, however, believed that density sparked and generated the spontaneous, organic systems that tended to serve neighborhoods well. However, promoting density was something Jacobs thought government could also support. She was more optimistic about cities' natural development than the Chicago School, but more optimistic about the helpfulness of planning than the Los Angeles School. She was less pessimistic about business and non-government actors than the Cultural Urban Theory, but not as optimistic of it as the contemporary Urban Culturalist School. Jacobs's insights are still popular with the movement called "New Urbanism."

[14] See Jacobs, *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*, "Introduction."

Modernism/Chicago Theory/"Formal City"	"New Urbanism"/Jacobs/"Informal City"
1. Thin the population	1. Encourage density
2. Zone to separate land uses	2. Promote mixed use (residence, retail, workplace, etc.)
3. Fewer pedestrians/street life	3. Increase foot traffic/street life
4. Formal community centers	4. Encourage informal "third spaces" chosen by people
5. Gated, class-separate turf Requires formal meeting of neighbors	5. Encourage overlapping turfs Fosters constant informal meeting of neighbors
6. Long blocks, self-contained expressways; driving is privileged	6. Short blocks, lots of connections; streets closed to traffic; walking is privileged
7. Formal policing only security	7. Informal "eyes on the street" supplements policing
8. Neighborhood: bedroom communities to a central downtown	8. Neighborhood: villages with own main streets as well as a downtown
9. Uniform type and age of buildings	9. Variety of types and ages of buildings

A CHRISTIAN RESPONSE TO BUILDING CITIES

As stated in the previous paper, "City Theology," the Bible understands cities to be dense and compact (Psalm 122:3) and diverse, since the New Jerusalem will contain people of every tongue, tribe, people, and nation (Isaiah 60; Revelation 7). It was the density of city life that produced the jurisprudence (the need for a court system to adjudicate disputes in a dense place) that was the basis for the "cities of refuge" in Israel. Obviously, the Bible gives no blueprint for how dense a city should be, such as aiming for 1,000, 10,000, or 100,000 people per square mile. But everything the Bible says about the importance of relationships supports the idea that people living in close proximity can create new social arrangements for human flourishing that might not exist if they were apart.

So, Christians should not view density as an evil. But Michael Batty rightly argues that many people will have an economic need for suburbs and other less dense communities within urban metroplexes. All in all, Christians should not be doctrinaire. The Chicago Theory led to over-zoning and control, but does that mean we should forgo zoning completely? Do we not set aside land for park space? Do we have no building codes? Thinkers like Condon and Jacobs seek to resist the strict ideologies and reductionisms of these urban theory schools. So should we. Yet being familiar with them is clarifying for Christians and ministers who want to promote the peace of the city.

HOW TO FIX CITIES ("URBAN RENEWAL")

Each school of urban theory has a basic approach to urban renewal, ameliorating the problems that come with urban density. Here is a snapshot of each school's way of dealing with housing:

The Chicago School, which had influence in North America and Europe, built enormous housing projects for the poor, who were segregated from the rest of the city in massive blocs and campuses. The problem with this approach is that the cost of upkeep for these estates is incredibly high, and they breed crime and addiction.

The Critical Urban Theory sees major government financial intervention as the only way forward. The preferred approach is a substantial degree of rent control, in which the government simply controls rent costs or provides subsidies for rent. The problem with this approach is that it requires raising taxes to levels that erode the tax base (see above).

The Los Angeles Postmodern School proposes no major interventions. The poor are supposedly helped by a trickle-down economic effect after growing the creative class in city centers. The problem with this approach is that without *some* government intervention, pure market forces lead to gentrification.

The Urban Culturalist Theory believes the way to renew cities is to create jobs and provide tax breaks in order to attract high-tech, young, progressive entrepreneurs and artists who will bring economic activity to the city and generate tax income. The problem with this approach is that it often only benefits city centers rather than the whole city's neighborhoods. In many cases, it produces severe gentrification, in which nearly all of the original working-class and poor residents are priced out and pushed out in favor of young professionals.

The new way forward for many North American cities is to integrate the poor into mixed-income neighborhoods with 20–30 percent of its housing made "affordable." Such properties have their rent subsidized by the market-rate housing nearby. All of this is achieved through a balance of public and private partnerships. The rationale is that private market interests alone tend to create housing shortages in cities because property owners want to increase their property values, but public housing alone is too expensive.

A CHRISTIAN RESPONSE TO "FIXING CITIES"

In many parts of the world, governments and central planners have come to recognize the limits of their ability to control, build, and fix cities. Perhaps the most promising approach today is bringing together a variety of parties—government, businesspeople and developers, local associations (including churches, temples, mosques, and community associations), and individual residents—to create plans for improving neighborhoods. Nevertheless, anyone who has tried this knows every group wants total control! Each group sees things differently and wants things done their own way. It is hard to agree, but if partnerships can be forged, even relatively minor ones, major improvements can be made.

Here is a case study for employing this practice in North America in relation to gentrification. In order to discern what the church's stance on gentrification should be, it must first clearly

see what it is. Gentrification happens when increasing numbers of people want to live in cities with increasing numbers of jobs, but as mentioned earlier, home- and landowners refuse to build enough new housing due to the vested interests of the wealthy, who want shortages to make their property values increase. Many times, these landowners form alliances with the poor, who are fearful of displacement, to stop the development of new housing. For example, New York City has added 70,000 to 90,000 jobs per year in the last decade, but no more than 20,000 new housing units per year. The result is a lack of affordable housing that drives young professionals and middle-class families into poorer communities, which often drives the poor out of those areas and onto the streets.

How should we address gentrification? What will *not* stop it is to stop developing housing. By doing that, the poor are not displaced immediately, but they will certainly be displaced eventually. It is possible, however, to control the process with a combination of public and private partnerships that increase class and race diversity and privilege poorer natives. Uncontrolled gentrification simply expels and homogenizes. Controlled gentrification creates greater diversity and an improved social order (schools, street safety, etc.), and, by bringing far better jobs into the neighborhood, it benefits the poor and working class who stay.

Some challenges remain—some poor people do get displaced. Wealthier neighborhoods will need to open up to displaced lower income residents, which often meets resistance. The church in its respective neighborhoods must address these issues with justice and compassion. Churches that are oblivious to these dynamics can allow and inadvertently participate in the harmful impacts of these changes.

CHRISTIAN URBAN THEORY?

Using H. Richard Niebuhr's "Christ and Culture" models, professor of urban missiology Michael D. Crane argues that churches tend to informally adopt one of the secular urban theories as the way they seek to change the city.[15] Crane believes that Niebuhr's cultural models correspond to the urban theory schools and influence the church's approach to the city.

For example, ***the Church Against the City*** shares similarities with the Chicago School. Its main strategies for seeking the peace of the city involve personal evangelism, strategic organized prayer, and getting politically involved (usually in conservative politics), and taking control of cultural centers of business, media, and the arts.

The Church of the City (Critical Urban Theory) seeks to partner with secular institutions to minister to the marginalized, get politically involved (usually in progressive politics), and address structural injustice in its teaching.

The Church and City in Paradox (Los Angeles School and the Urban Culturalist Theory)

[15] Michael D. Crane, "The Spectrum of Christian Models of Urban Transformation" in *International Journal of Urban Transformation*, Vol. 5, May 2021.

seeks peace through evangelism and church planting, the integration of faith and work, social entrepreneurship, and establishing ministries dedicated to mercy and justice. It celebrates individual charity and ministers to the marginalized.

These three approaches are common. The first is the view of more fundamentalist or conservative churches with a negative, combative approach to culture and the city. It tends to emphasize only the spiritual (to "change culture one heart at a time") but it also, in a somewhat contradictory way, encourages Christians to secure cultural positions of power to change society. The second is the view of progressive churches with a liberal theology and tends to be almost wholly political rather than spiritual. The third is an approach that has a more positive view of the city but still tends to avoid engaging the structures of the city itself. Instead, this approach creates a "benevolent empire" of non-profits.

The Church Transforming the City has the attributes in the description of the Church and City in Paradox above but adds to them. It sometimes partners with secular institutions, such as local housing projects or public schools, to minister to the marginalized. Christian community development corporations target entire neighborhoods, not just populations, and initiate multiple nonprofits in an area. This church partners with government and businesses to renew neighborhoods and organize the community. It advocates Christians' long-term residence and investment in local neighborhoods.

This paper shows that there are a number of theories on how cities change—and that some are better than others. I've proposed that urban Christians and church leaders should be learners in this field of how cities change and how they can be changed in a way that begets goodness. In general, urban churches ignore these dynamics rather than seeking to understand and navigate them. City to City aims to equip urban church leaders to understand the schools of thought and theories at play, but most of all we want to equip churches to be agents of good—of shalom in their communities. The more we understand the dynamics of how cities work, the more effective we will be.

URBAN MINISTRY SKILLS

In light of everything said above, here are some skills that urban ministry leaders should cultivate:

- **Organizational development:** The ability to perform social entrepreneurship or at least to empower and oversee social entrepreneurs that can run ministries that create jobs and pursue justice in a neighborhood.
- **Cultural sensitivity:** Deep awareness of and sensitivity to cultural differences. This is the ability to know not just a great deal about the cultures and histories of different ethnic groups, but also differences in generations, professions, and lifestyles. Urban leaders know the numerous subcultures of their area, and seek to foster good relationships across ethnic and cultural boundaries. It's important to show respect and understanding, to empower, and to listen; and to employ patience during ethnic conflict and misunderstandings.

- **Integration of faith and work:** Part of discipling urbanites involves helping them think through the Christian worldview's implications for their work.
- **Complex evangelism:** Urbanites are far too diverse for a single evangelistic presentation or method to reach them all. Leaders must know how to approach Jews, Muslims, atheists, nominal Catholics and Protestants, progressives, conservatives, and more with the gospel.
- **Urban sensibility:** This is a difficult-to-define ability to connect with urban people. It includes, at least, a sense of irony versus sentimentality, a concern for high production values (though in a manner that conveys authenticity, not slickness), openness to innovation and constant change, and an ability to make new friends in a transient place.
- **Neighborhood connection:** Suburbanites largely ignore their neighborhoods, assuming its social systems function properly. When there is a problem, they assume they will fix it with formal means. However, many urbanites go to community board meetings, care about the local public school, work hard to meet all the local business owners, and seek to accrue social capital for fixing problems. A church and its people must be seen as good neighbors that make an effort to be active participants in solving these problems.
- **Ministry to and relationships with artists:** In cities, artists are a big part of the population, a group to minister to, not just to hire. Churches need to serve them, as well as utilize them without simply using them.
- **Preaching to believers and non-believers at the same time:** Preaching should engage not just "felt needs," such as discouragement, anxiety, anger, and family issues, but also cultural narratives, such as those about forming identity and justice.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES RECOMMENDED BY CITY TO CITY

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PART ELEVEN

Public Theology

The DNA of City to City is something that unites us. It is a set of practices and beliefs that we hold in common, and yet it is flexible enough to be applied and practiced differently in various cultures, nations, and cities. Oftentimes, this requires finding a balance in how much direction we offer on a given topic and how much we leave it open to variation. Public theology is perhaps one of the hardest matters to balance. When it comes to discussing how churches and Christians engage with public and political issues it is easy to become either over-prescriptive or not prescriptive enough.

On one hand, the Bible tells us we must be "the salt of the earth" and "the light of the world" (Matthew 5:13–16; 1 Peter 2:9–12), so others can see us loving our neighbors and working for the public good. This always has political implications. We are also to disciple our church members to do "all things for the glory of God" (1 Corinthians 10:31 NASB) so that Christ may have supremacy in every area of their lives (Colossians 1:18). This means when Christians exercise their political duties and rights as citizens, they must do so in distinctively Christian ways. It is the church's job to teach them to do so. This is public theology.

On the other hand, each country's politics are different. For example, one might think that the U.S. and the UK are mirror images of each other—that Labour Party members in the UK are the same as the Democrats in the U.S.; and that the Conservatives are the same as the Republicans. But they are not identical, and some question whether the dissimilarities outnumber the similarities. Generally speaking, the concepts of a political "left" and "right" are broadly understandable, especially in cities. But the specific issues around which liberal and conservative forces gather are often quite different from country to country.

The purpose of this paper is therefore to get this subject on City to City's "map." In the past, we have not spoken much about public theology—or if we have, it's been buried in discussions of cultural engagement. Can we talk about Christians and politics at a level high enough to serve the global church? I believe we can, though I remain eager to stand corrected by my brothers and sisters around the world. I will necessarily be speaking as an American from my context within the U.S., but I hope it serves as a case study that holds principles that may be applicable more broadly.

THE TWO CITIES

In his work *The City of God*, St. Augustine states that Christians live in two "cities," or social orders, at once. First, we are part of the "City of God." American historian George Marsden states

that this city is "made up of those who are united with each other … because of their common love for the one Triune God … [and] based on 'loving one's neighbor as oneself.'"[1] Christianity creates a new social order in which our heart's highest love is God—and this prevents us from making idols out of our individual interests, our families, our people, and our country.

Second, there is the "City of Man"—a social order based not on love and self-sacrifice but on power, exploitation, and protecting self-interest. Instead of using our lives to serve others, the operating principle of the City of Man is using others' lives to serve our own.

TWO BIBLICAL, THEOLOGICAL TRUTHS ABOUT HUMAN BEINGS

Augustine's *The City of God* also distills and teaches two key principles about the relationship of Christians to the political order.[2] But in order to examine how Christians must function in the political order, we must first examine how we function as human beings. There are two facets of our nature that are important to keep in mind.

First, we are made in the image of God but fallen. This means that all humans are supremely valuable yet also inherently selfish and prone to evil. This conclusion runs counter to "the prevailing secular views that shape most historical interpretation ... [resting on] the assumption that humans are naturally good, and that social, economic, political, psychological, or religious circumstances are usually responsible for leading them astray."[3] These views imply that goodness is inherent in human beings and that evil comes from the social environments they are in. In truth, social systems *can* aggravate evil and be evil, but they do not create it out of nothing. Social systems become evil because they arise from the evil of the human heart. Thus, we cannot live with the simplistic idea that people are good, and only social systems are evil.

Second, we must remember that Christians are not exempt from human depravity. Not only is there a radical good and evil in human beings *en masse*, but the duality also lives in religious people and Christians. Thus, we cannot live with the simplistic idea that all Christians are good and all non-Christians are evil, nor the idea that the secular is always to be preferred and Christians are all evil bigots.

PRINCIPLES FOR POLITICS

If we understand these theological principles about humans, we can then discern some resulting principles about human politics. For example, we should avoid either the utopianism of the left or the nostalgic pessimism of the right. Based on the duality of all humans, Augustine's view of the two cities keeps us from both of these faults. It protects us from the naïve idealism so often found

[1] George Marsden, *Religion and American Culture*: *A Brief History* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2018), 7–8.
[2] Ibid., 7ff.
[3] Ibid.

in the left—a view that the past was terrible and oppressive, and that new political arrangements can bring about a good society, since evil is not in humans but in social systems. In this view, politics become a form of religion and salvation. Augustine's formula can also prevent a common shortcoming of the right, namely the attempt to recapture a bygone, golden era—which, in reality, was just another form of the City of Man—and thus forgetting that the City of God will triumph.

We should similarly avoid the reductionisms of the left and the right. For example, we must remember that evil is in the heart. It does not originate in a society or social structure (as Rousseau or Marx state), though these systems *can* aggravate it. This counters the left's overconfidence in the state and the ability to solve all problems through political power. We must also remember that Christians are sinners, too, and may not be better cultural guides or wielders of power. This counters the right's overconfidence in Christians taking power or controlling culture, or in relying on the power of the unregulated free market to solve problems.

We must not identify the City of God with any current political order. For some, the main message of Augustine's work is that it is a mistake to identify any earthly city or political entity as being *the* City of God. The theological reasons for this are many, but here are two. First, the kingdom of God is "already-but-not-yet." Thus, we cannot create a purely Christian society until God himself establishes it. Second, the gospel is culturally flexible. Christians do not have a New Testament "book of Leviticus" that tells us how to live in every culture. Thus, Christians have the freedom—and responsibility—to contextualize the gospel to different cultures, which falls outside the scope of aligning with a pre-established political order. Therefore, Christians live in both the City of God (only here in part through the Holy Spirit) and the City of Man; and these two social orders must not be confused or thought to be utterly separate. This counters the idea that there can be one main Christian political program, party, social order, or culture; as well as the idea that Christians can withdraw into a spiritual existence by being apolitical, since to abstain from political change is to effectively support the political status quo. Christians must allow their faith to inform their politics and, at the same time, avoid giving in to idols.

We must therefore expect and be willing to live with a good degree of imperfection when it comes to engaging culture and politics. There will always be a mixture of good and bad. Christians are primarily citizens of the City of God, not of the City of Man (Philippians 3:20). Therefore we will never be fully at home here. Yet we are told to be neighbors and participants in our earthly cities (Luke 10:25ff; Jeremiah 29:4–7). All earthly cities are also a mixture of good and bad. In general, they are primarily characterized by the structures and motivations of the City of Man, but through God's common grace and the influence of Christians, many societies show some of the peace and justice of the City of God. At the same time, we must remember that the church itself, while hopefully characterized far more by the values of the City of God, is also an imperfect mixture.

Any political movement or party will contain contradictions of great virtue and complicity with evil. Christians involved in political parties should be both good team members but also critics of their parties, because all secular or non-Christian views of the good will make idols out

of something. For example, the left will trust government far too much, and the right will trust the market far too much. This mixture of outcomes and of method is even true of completely Christian organizations and movements that seek to do good. As George Marsden says, "While the faith can sometimes temper the cultural forces that are most antithetical to its principal teachings, often the faith instead becomes reshaped by those very forces."[4]

THE BIBLICAL VIEW OF THE STATE

TEACHINGS OF JESUS VS THEOCRATIC CONCEPTIONS OF THE STATE

In Mark 12:13–17 and Luke 20:20–26, the Pharisees seek to trap Jesus by showing him a Roman coin, asking if it is just for them to pay taxes to Caesar. Jesus responds, "Give back to Caesar what is Caesar's and to God what is God's." This illustrates that human governments should not be expected to be thoroughly Christian, and that there is indeed a legitimate biblical basis for the idea of "the separation of church and state." Biblical scholar D. A. Carson puts it like this:

> Under a strict theocracy, Jesus' words would be incoherent: the rule of God is mediated by the king so that their domains are not so easily separable … . Here is Jesus announcing that a distinction must be made between Caesar's claims [which have their own rights] and the claims of God. Of course this does not mean that Caesar's domain is entirely independent of God's domain, nor that God does not remain in providential control. But it is hard to avoid the conclusion that Jesus is announcing a fundamental change in the administration of the covenant community. The locus of the community is no longer a theocratic kingdom [as it was in Israel]; it is now an assembly of churches from around the world, living under many kings and "Caesars," and offering worship to none. That is why many Christians around the world trace the history of the non-establishment of a particular religion to this utterance of the Lord Jesus himself.[5]

Similarly, in John 18:36, Jesus said his kingdom is not of this world. If it were, his servants would fight to prevent his arrest by the Jewish leaders. But his kingdom is from another place. Here we have a very Augustinian theme, namely that Christians *do* work for a kingdom—Christ's kingdom—but believers are not to think they establish the kingdom by coercive political action or identifying the City of God as any particular place or political order. Taking state power, the power of the sword, is not the way to work for Christ's kingdom. That kingdom is "from another

[4] Ibid., 9.

[5] D. A. Carson, *For the Love of God: Volume 1* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2006), 9.

place," in that it takes shape in the world but is not *from* the world, and so its methods differ. As Ernest Shurtleff's 1887 hymn "Lead On, O King Eternal" goes, "For not with swords' loud clashing, or roll of stirring drums—with deeds of love and mercy the heavenly kingdom comes."

TEACHINGS OF JESUS VS TOTALITARIAN CONCEPTIONS OF THE STATE

Despite the above statements against theocratic conceptions of our present age—against the idea that Christians should try to take power or make the state a completely Christian body—Jesus also tells Pilate that his temporal power is enjoyed only by the permission of God. Jesus' argument about whose image is on the coin strongly hints that our highest allegiance must always be to God since we bear his image. There are direct, biblical statements that intimate a case for civil disobedience if state law requires Christians to disobey God's law. When Peter and the apostles are questioned by the Sanhedrin in Acts 5, they plainly state in verse 29 that they "must obey God rather than human beings!" When totalitarian states intrude into the spheres of family and church and seek to dictate life in every part, this must be resisted.

TEACHINGS OF THE NEW TESTAMENT WRITERS

1 Timothy 2:1–2, Titus 3:1, and, most famously, Romans 13:1–7 teach that the state (even the pagan, Roman state of the time) has been instituted by God and should be God's "minister for good." What we learn here is that the state has two basic functions. First, it bears the power of the "sword" (Romans 13:4) against evil, which is coercive power. It can force us to obey the law with the threat of fines, imprisonment, or execution. It also bears the sword by defending the nation against invasion. In all of these cases, it stands against "evil." Second, the state is also to serve "your good" (Romans 13:4). Some try to argue that the only way the state serves the good is by punishing evil with the sword. This view believes the state is not, for example, to provide education, food, and goods for the poor. They would say Joseph's hunger relief program (Genesis 41:47–57), run by the state, was completely wrong. This approach (mainly taken by politically conservative American commentators) believes the government should take a limited role and also argues for extremely low taxes and a stripped-down state. But most commentators (Douglas Moo, for example) believe verses 3 and 4 teach that the state has both the job of promoting and commending the common good *and* punishing wrongdoing.

But while many want to excessively limit the state's role in bringing about the common good (or make it into a theocracy), there is an opposite danger. The state can be seen as a savior, one that will finally solve human problems by taking totalitarian control of human life, oppressing all opposition, and likely repressing freedom of religious expression. As we saw in Jesus' teaching, this is also something Christians must avoid and resist. The book of Revelation features this type of government as a major theme. The reference to the worship of the ruler in Revelation 13:15

clearly refers to Roman Caesars and the demand to make sacrifices to them and worship them as gods. But most understand Revelation to be a book that points to all totalitarian governments throughout history that have put themselves in the place of God, become demonic, and oppressed the people of God.

PREACHING AND ENDORSEMENT

Ministers today have the delicate task of preaching on moral issues without endorsing a specific political or public policy. We *should* speak to issues that the Bible addresses that have political implications—for example, the Bible says much about how to treat aliens and immigrants—but it can be difficult to know how to implement this in today's culture. In the U.S., Europe, parts of Latin America, and other places, immigration is a burning and divisive political issue. Just as divisive is the matter of poverty and injustice, both of which the Bible also says much about. Likewise, what the Bible says about sexuality and gender is also seen as a political issue in many countries.

There are three problems with this task that should be acknowledged and addressed.

- Christians, pastors or otherwise, should not shy away from a close study of the biblical texts and sermons just because they touch on hot issues. That would be cowardice and shrinking from the task of teaching "the whole counsel of God" (Acts 20:27 ESV) to people.
- We should also avoid the temptation of going too far beyond the text and supporting political policies, parties, or candidates that cannot be given a biblical mandate.
- We should be prepared for accusations that we are backing a certain candidate or policy in a covert way (even when we are avoiding doing this).

For example, the Trump administration in the U.S. often used deprecating language in describing immigrants. Christian preachers can cite numerous biblical passages about showing care, respect, and concern for immigrants and refugees. To speak this way would, at least, implicitly critique certain political figures by advocating for biblical attitudes and standpoints. However, preachers have no biblical authority to say exactly what the country's immigration policy should be. Should their country allow in fifty thousand, half a million, or a million legal immigrants per year? Because the Bible doesn't speak to the issue with such a level of detail, preachers should not try to throw their weight behind one policy—at least not in the pulpit, where it represents the whole church.

CORPORATE IDOLS AND COMPETING POLITICAL ORDERS

Augustine says the City of Man is inevitably based on idols. That is, any political order that is not consciously and diligently grounded in the Triune God will necessarily create idols. The City of

Man always creates social and cultural idols, making something besides God the highest love. It is not just whole cultures that create idols but individual cities as well. A joke from Mark Twain reveals the idols of at least three: "In Boston they ask, how much does he know? In New York, how much is he worth? In Philadelphia, who were his parents?"

Augustine's way of analyzing every political culture in terms of its "common objects of highest love" gives Christians a critical tool to analyze political and social orders. Two thinkers who have analyzed the basic, recurrent political impulses of the Western, modern age are Reinhold Niebuhr[6] and David T. Koyzis.[7] While this will not be universally applicable across all countries and cultures, all global cities are affected by Western culture, and so these analyses can be useful.

NIEBUHR'S IDOLATRIES

Niebuhr highlights at least four dominant idolatries within the West.

1. Romanticism, which makes an idol out of the individual. Lately, this has been called expressive individualism—the idea that the highest good is for us to follow our hearts, express ourselves, and fulfill our deepest dreams and longings. Niebuhr says this "worships some unique or particular vital force in the individual … It is the old religion of self-glorification."[8]

2. Rationalism, which makes an idol out of science, technology, and reason. While romanticism thinks the answer to all things is free self-expression, rationalism sees science as our savior. "Humanistic rationalism, forgetting that human reason … is a derived, dependent, created reality … believes that its gradual extension is the guarantee of the ultimate destruction of evil in history."[9]

3. Nationalism, which makes an idol out of one's race and nation. Niebuhr mentions the slogan of "*Blut und Boden*," the Nazi slogan promoting one race (*Blut*, or blood) and land (*Boden*, or soil). Fascism idealized rural people as the real nation, as opposed to the cities filled with foreigners. Niebuhr calls this the "self-glorification of race … and nation" rather than of the individual.[10]

4. Socialism, which makes an idol out of the state and the perspective and actions of the oppressed ("the proletariat"). Niebuhr writes that Marxism rightly "sees the pretensions of all 'the wise, the mighty, and the noble,'" but then regards "the life of the proletariat as having some mystic union with the absolute."[11] Niebuhr shows his preference for socialism over nationalistic fascism (remember, he was writing this in 1937), but he rightly adds, "As every culture which is

[6] Reinhold Niebuhr, "The Christian Church in a Secular Age" in Robert McAfee Brown, *The Essential Reinhold Niebuhr: Selected Essays and Addresses* (Newhaven, CT: Yale University Press, 1986), 79–92.

[7] David T. Koyzis, *Political Visions and Illusion: A Survey of and Christian Critique of Contemporary Ideologies*, 2nd edition (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2019).

[8] Niebuhr, "The Christian Church in a Secular Age," 80.

[9] Ibid., 81.

[10] Ibid.

[11] Ibid., 82.

not confronted with the one holy God, the creator, Lord, and judge of the world, [Marxism] also ends in the sin of self-glorification."[12]

KOYZIS' IDEOLOGIES

Koyzis observes at least three predominant ideologies in the West.

1. Neo-liberalism, which makes an idol out of the liberalism of the free individual. Those with this line of thinking seek a society based on individual freedom of choice. The best society is seen not as one united by common religious or cultural values (as in nationalism), but a society united by only one value—the freedom to live as one sees fit, so long as others are not harmed. After the mid-twentieth-century defeats of fascism and communism, classic liberalism became so dominant in the West that it has since broken into two branches that vie with each other. One is called *conservatism* and one is called *liberalism*, but they are both liberalism in that they assume the primacy of the autonomous self and seek a meritocratic society.[13]

The *conservative branch* makes an idol of the market and entrepreneurship. They believe that a society in its best form has a free capital market and open competition with little government regulation and taxes. They believe each individual is wholly responsible for his or her situation—if a person is poor in a free country, it is their fault. The conservative branch's primary playing field is the world of business. The *liberal branch* makes an idol of science, expertise, and self-expression. They believe all relationships are transactional and reduced to contracting individuals to maximize their own self-interests. They believe that science and technology are the main ways to handle problems. Their primary playing field is the world of elite cultural institutions.

2. Nationalism, which makes an idol out of their people and their nation. Both civic and ethnic nations can become preoccupied with their status, and idolatry seeps in. It begins with "airbrushing" one's national history—glossing over past injustices. The idol of nationalism always demands that people give their highest loyalty to their motherland and "their people." It means that those deemed "not our people" are ostracized and excluded in one of several ways: elimination (they are driven out), domination (they are allowed to be present but are given fewer rights and may be terrorized), assimilation (they are refused admission to most circles unless they lose their cultural distinctiveness), or abandonment (their basic needs are willfully ignored).

3. Socialism, which makes an idol out of one's racial, gender, and sexual identity and looks to the government for its needs. While liberalism sees our condition as solely due to individual choice, socialism believes that crime and poverty are not due to individual action at all, but rather are the byproducts of social structures. Freedom of choice, speech, and thought are seen as ruses by which the powerful keep their power.

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[12] Ibid., 83.

[13] See Patrick J. Deneen, *Why Liberalism Failed* (Newhaven, CT: Yale University Press, 2019).

Today, modern progressives believe that people should use their gender, race, and sexuality to garner power as well. These beliefs assert that our main identity is not individual but social. Unequal outcomes between groups are never due to internal factors—never the result of the individual effort or the group's culture. Instead, inequalities are always the result of external, systemic social factors that run all the way down to society's roots. The solution is never self-improvement or a stronger family life—it is social policies and transfer of power. The only way forward is to discredit beliefs and discourses that accrue power for social groups and, through the state, to redistribute power.

A SUMMARY

All in all, we see that each of these ideologies does at least these things:

- They idolize something that is good but fallen (such as a nation's people, the free market, individual freedom, scientific reason, race, gender, or government).
- They demonize something that is good but fallen (such as other races and cultures, governments and large organizations, moral authorities such as religion and family, or the free market).
- They tend to exclude and marginalize classes of people they see as enemies and tend to idolize those they see as saviors.
- They fail to see the *complexity* of evil. The Bible sees the world, the flesh, and the devil. Progressives see only the world—systemic evil. Conservatives see only the flesh—individual moral evil. (Nationalists have some sense of both but only in other cultures.) None recognize the devil—the demonic aspect of evil in the world. And so they all offer simplistic solutions not only to society but also to individuals. All of these secular hopes will fail because they don't fit the complexity of our good-but-fallen reality.

LESSONS FROM THIS ANALYSIS

Christians can't wholly support or buy into any of these ideologies. Considered biblically, some of these ideologies put too much emphasis on systemic, structural factors when dealing with racial and economic injustice, and others too little. Some put too much emphasis on individual responsibility, and some too little. Some are too individualistic, and others are too collectivistic. Some are too distrustful of the market and too trusting of institutions and government.

Others have the opposite problem. Both nationalism and socialism ironically make group, race, or class identities absolute, even though the ideologies are great enemies. Some are too anti-religious, while others tend to use religion for political purposes. Some say an individual is free to do with their sexuality whatever they want but not their money; others say an individual is free

to do whatever they want with their money, but they must hold to traditional sexual ethics. Some tend to idolize the traditional family and exaggerate gender differences, while others subvert the traditional family and seek to blur gender distinctions. Some believe that science can provide moral values for public policy, while others distrust science far too much. Some valorize the poor, and others demonize the poor. Some refuse to reform the criminal justice system at all, while others want to dismantle it.

Christians can be neither apolitical nor uncritical of their political school or party. To be apolitical (to refrain from being active in politics or even voting) is essentially to support the political status quo. Our doctrine of sin tells us there is no society that does not need change and does not have its injustices. Christians, then, are in the awkward position of having to vote for parties dominated by one or more of these idols, trying their best to defend the positive features of their respective programs while critiquing (and not overlooking) the wrong or even toxic elements within them.

Common Christian faith must be a stronger bond than common culture, race, or politics. As stated earlier, Augustine points out that while all Christians live in both the City of Man and the City of God, our chief allegiance and citizenship is to the former (Philippians 3:20). Yet many Christians publicly disown and attack other believers who share the same beliefs in Christ but are not politically aligned with them. They feel a stronger unity with people of the same politics than with those of the same faith, even though Paul insists that Christians must not let legal differences supersede their oneness in Christ (1 Corinthians 6:6–7) or obscure their main citizenship (Ephesians 2:19; Hebrews 13:14). When the church as a whole is perceived as foot soldiers for a political party rather than an entity that transcends politics, then the world sees strong evidence that religion is merely a cover for people who want power.

Christians' biblical commitments are disparate (by the world's categories), not necessarily centrist. Christians should not see non-partisanship as centrism—some moderate position between two poles that aims to split the difference. When faced with two alternatives on the world's spectrum of thought, such as rationalism and empiricism, monism and naturalism, or legalism and antinomianism, Christianity critiques each fundamentally but does not ignore the insights of either that are provided by common grace. Rather, it arrives at a position *off* the spectrum, which Christopher Watkin calls "biblical diagonalization."[14] When it comes to politics, Christians' biblical commitments are not so much centrist as they are seemingly disparate. They combine strong, even extreme (to some) views on sexuality on the one hand and poverty on the other. Because of this, Christians will constantly find themselves working with non-believing people who are allied with them on one issue but quite opposed to them on another.

[14] See Christopher Watkin, *Thinking Through Creation: Genesis 1 and 2 as Tools of Cultural Critique* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2017), 26–28. See the City to City DNA paper six on "Biblical High Theory."

PRACTICAL STEPS FOR CHRISTIAN POLITICAL ENGAGEMENT

Be active in many places on the political spectrum. Usually (but not always), the Bible gives us morals and norms but not a detailed program for exactly how to promote those norms in a democratic, pluralistic society. We should, for example, be committed to the good of the poor and the immigrant, but the Bible does not tell us exactly how to do this. It doesn't tell us how high or low taxes should be, what structures should support the poor, and so on. These are matters of wisdom and prudence, not obedience to clear biblical prescriptions. This means the following:

- **We should be kind to other believers who differ from us politically:** When navigating issues that the Bible does not specifically cover, Christians must allow one another to come to different conclusions about the best means to the ends. (In the classic formulation, we should not bind the conscience of Christians where Scripture has left it free.)[15] There is freedom within biblical absolutes to work these things out for ourselves. We should respect each other's differences as we go about our work.
- **We should not be surprised to see Bible-believing Christians working at different places on the political spectrum:** Believers who have the same faith and same commitments may come to different conclusions about the best, most prudent way to seek the same social goals. Believers may want to focus on just one or two issues and so are willing to ally themselves with activists who are radically different in their views of other things. For example, a believer who is focused on reforming the criminal justice system might have common cause with groups of people that do not agree with them on a litany of other things, such as abortion or sexual expression. Other Christians who are politically active in stopping abortion may feel their consciences do not allow them to work as closely with those groups, but may find themselves working with groups that don't share their view of immigrants or the impoverished. We should inhabit the organizations and parties that are, overall, best for us to pursue our biblical convictions. But as we noted above, we should not be silent (or excessively loud) about the Christian inspiration for our political commitments, and we should not be silent (or excessively loud) in criticizing the strong ideological reductionistic elements that will inevitably show up in that party.

Recognize the difference between the church as an institution and the church scattered in society. In general, it is best that the institutional church—both entire denominations and local congregations—does not raise money for and promote particular political candidates and policies. At the practical level, church leaders usually do not have the expertise to make public statements on political issues, or to run affordable housing complexes, community development corporations, schools, or other such projects. I have seen churches trying to institutionally "do justice" get consumed by it and neglect the lifeblood of the church—evangelizing and forming disciples

[15] See The Westminster Confession, chapter 20, ii, http://thewestminsterstandards.com/wcf-chapter-20-of-christian-liberty-and-liberty-of-conscience-20-1-20-2/.

through God's Word and sacrament. Another problem is that of partisanship. Constant, direct political declarations from a local church can implicitly communicate, "If you don't agree with our politics, you aren't welcome to join us in hearing the gospel."

Nevertheless, churches among the poor and marginalized may not have the luxury of being totally apolitical. For example, during the years of the Jim Crow laws in the U.S. and frequent lynchings, should the Black church have stayed apolitical and not called out civic leaders for their injustice? In times of social crises—such as in Nazi-led Germany—the church must necessarily take institutional political stands. Of course, it will always be debatable as to when that "social crisis" line has been crossed.

In general, it is individual Christians who should be salt and light and active politically—either in existing political organizations and parties or organized into new voluntary associations—to pursue a fair and thriving society, rather than church leaders dictating to their members how they should vote. Recognize the difference between the church gathered, which evangelizes and disciples people for their work in the world; and the church scattered, in which Christians apply the Bible and worldview to every area of life.

Christians in any society should regularly come together across the political spectrum. Christians must do this in order to achieve two things. The first is relationship. We must forge and maintain friendships so as not to fall into the caricatures of opposing political positions to which we are prone. The second is hard-won consensus. Despite noting above that the Bible does not give us political blueprints, we must acknowledge that few Christians read Scripture communally and thoughtfully in order to reflect on political issues together. It is possible that hard work in this area by Christians who are initially more distant from each other politically (because the world's parties and frameworks are more distant) may bring about greater consensus by Christians on what the biblical views of justice, morality, and human thriving can look like here and now.

ADDITIONAL READING RECOMMENDED BY CITY TO CITY

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PART TWELVE

Reconciliation

Christians who live in cities are surrounded by people who are profoundly different from them—and many of these people are hostile toward their beliefs. This situation is nothing new. The earliest Christians were distinct members of their societies, but they were no strangers to hostility. However, these believers did not respond to oppression with their own hate or violence. In fact, they were famous for non-retaliation. Following in the footsteps of Jesus and Stephen, they prayed for their persecutors (Luke 23:34–46; Acts 7:54–60). Within the Christian community itself, people found forgiveness from God and kept their relationships in good repair through a process of forgiveness and repentance.

The church today should still be known as a community of reconciliation. It should be renowned for reaching out to neighbors and communities and building bridges between them. The church should also be known for speaking the truth in love, rather than remaining silent on issues or being harsh and abrasive.

SEEING THE MISSION OF GOD AND THE CHURCH AS RECONCILIATION

The account of the Fall in Genesis 3 describes the results of sin as alienation. Sin causes *spiritual* alienation from God (as seen in Adam and Eve's need to hide from God), *psychological* alienation from ourselves (seen in the shame and fear they experienced), *social* alienation from others (seen in the sense of nakedness and the need to cover up), and *physical* alienation from nature (seen in Adam and Eve being subjected to sickness, aging, and death). Sin breaks apart things that were once in a harmonious relationship. Therefore, redemption can essentially be viewed as the work of reconciliation, of bringing together things that sin has broken apart.

Of course, the primary work of reconciliation is evangelism, reconciling human beings to God. Paul speaks of Christian ministry in these terms in 2 Corinthians 5:17–20. But Colossians 1:19–20 says that God's purpose is "through [Christ] to reconcile to himself all things," and that in Christ, God will eventually "bring unity to all things in heaven and on earth under Christ" (Ephesians 1:10). The physical creation will be finally healed (Romans 8:18–24) and all peoples and nations will finally be reconciled (Revelation 7:9–17, 21:1–22:5).

The work of the kingdom, as we have seen, is already-but-not-yet. The "not yet" is the complete and final healing of all these rifts and broken relationships. We must not think that any human endeavor can ever bring about that healing now. As Christians we must not be deceived

by the utopianism of some political movement or by the claims of science and technology to solve our problems. Yet the "already" means Christians can and should work for the healing of these rifts now, even if we cannot entirely achieve it on our own or at the present time.

BEING A COMMUNITY OF RECONCILIATION

As stated before, one type of alienation sin has caused is socially alienating individuals and groups from each other. The church can work toward healing the results of sin by being a community of reconciliation in three ways.

Being a community that brings reconciliation of past injustices in its culture. In some cases the church can help its members repent and assist them in working for reconciliation in light of past wrongs that they supported by commission or omission. This might be issues such as apartheid in South Africa, ethnic strife in the Balkans, genocides in Rwanda, sectarian strife in Northern Ireland, slavery and Jim Crow laws in the U.S. and many places in the West Indies, the treatment of aboriginal people in many countries, the treatment of Uighurs by the Chinese, and so on. The difficulty here is that Christians themselves are often divided in their view of these conflicts. Church leaders can often do no more than call their members to lay aside their habitual stances and instincts and come together for prayer, biblical study, and discernment. In some cases, however, the church has led the way in bringing reconciliation over past wrongs. As the examples above demonstrate, this kind of work differs enormously from culture to culture, with each nation and church having a different history. Therefore, the scope and details of this kind of reconciliatory ministry vary, and thus it cannot thoroughly be treated in the rest of this paper.

Being a community that builds bridges between local groups that need reconciliation. Christian churches in urban neighborhoods occupy environments that are extremely pluralistic, with a host of other religious, political, ethnic, and cultural communities, all of whom have deeply different worldviews and moral frameworks. For example, Astoria, a neighborhood in Queens close to where I live, has synagogues, prominent Greek Orthodox churches, Catholic cathedrals, mainline Protestant churches, Greek and Cypriot associations, a Maltese center, a Croatian and Bosnian community, Muslim mosques, and an LGBT community. There are, I'm sure, at least another two dozen identifiable communities I have not named. To all appearances, Astoria is a multiethnic, diverse neighborhood. And yet, the various groups largely keep to themselves and rarely mix together. In many cases, there are real tensions. A Christian church in the midst of all this diversity may be ignored by most and treated with wariness or hostility by others.

In environments like these, we must ask ourselves the following questions:

1. How can people with deeply different worldviews and moral frameworks talk to each other in ways that lead to greater understanding?

2. How can we work together as much as possible to make our neighborhoods better places to live for all residents, regardless of beliefs?

3. How can we all treat our neighbors with respect rather than demonizing them?

Because of Christianity's theological and spiritual resources, new churches can make major contributions to creating urban communities characterized by seeking solutions to those three questions.

Being a community of individuals who find reconciliation. You could argue the biblical teaching on forgiveness and reconciliation is so radical that there are no cultures or societies that are in accordance with it. It may be here that we can most clearly see the truth of Bonhoeffer's statement, "Our community with one another [in Christ] consists solely in what Christ has done to both of us. Christian brotherhood is a spiritual and not a human reality. In this it differs from all other communities."[1] In its most basic and simple form, the biblical teaching is that Christians in community are to never give up on one another, never give up on a relationship, and never write off another believer by having nothing to do with them. (See, for example, Ephesians 4:2–4 and Romans 12:8.)

ISSUES ARISING FROM BRIDGE-BUILDING BETWEEN GROUPS

Bridge-building can draw on a number of theological beliefs and resources to produce the humility, patience, love, and wisdom necessary to begin and maintain friendships across differences. But many Christians are immediately suspicious of the very concept of bridge-building. Some will say that the only reason we should reach out to a Muslim or gay community is to evangelize them, not to be friends or partners. But there is no reason to pit these two things against each other. Bridge-building is perhaps a slower form of evangelism in that we may not present or debate the gospel with people right away, but it may actually be a far more effective type of evangelism in the long run. One reason for this is that working to better the community in partnership with others helps to lessen suspicions about the church and fosters a more positive regard for it. This positions the neighborhood at large to be more open to evangelistic efforts than they might be otherwise. And while an evangelistic motive must play a foundational part in all of our bridge-building work, there are also other theological reasons and resources that empower us to create friendships and networks among deeply different groups of people.[2]

OUR DOCTRINE OF HISTORY

As has been said in the previous paper ("Public Theology"), Augustine's *The City of God* distills the biblical teaching that we live in an era in which God's kingdom (the City of God) is partially but not yet fully present in the world's social order (the City of Man). And as was also stated, this means no society or city must be fully identified with the City of God. The political left believe

[1] Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together* (London: SCM Press, 1954), 23, 25, 26.

[2] See the Additional Reading section at the end of this paper.

they can bring in a golden age, and the political right tend to mourn for some past age. This leads them both to demonize groups they feel are on the wrong side of history, and to exist in a constant state of alarm, anger, and grief over those who oppose them. But our doctrine of history can prevent Christians from falling into these political extremes. We know that progress can only ever be partial—and yet progress is also possible. This makes it feasible to be more respectful and patient with people from whom we differ.

OUR DOCTRINE OF IDENTITY

In *Destroyer of the Gods*, New Testament scholar and historian Larry Hurtado argues that before Christianity there was no such thing as a chosen identity—even in terms of one's religion.[3] The particular gods associated with the city, tribe, or nation from which someone hailed automatically became their gods. One's religious, personal, ethnic, and cultural identity were all mixed together and assigned at birth. But the Christian God is the God of all places. Anyone can become a Christian and serve him, regardless of the environment in which they were raised. When someone converts to Christianity, they are baptized "into the Name," and their Christian identity supersedes but does not efface their ethnicity, place of birth, or cultural background. Hurtado concludes Christians choose their first primary identity rather than having it assigned, and so Christians are deeply concerned that people are free to choose their faith, not coerced into faith or no faith through social pressure.

OUR DOCTRINE OF SIN AND COMMON GRACE

Because of sin, believers are never as good in practice as our doctrine should make us. Because of common grace and the image of God, all people are better in practice than their wrong beliefs should make them. Put together, we should expect to meet non-believers who may be more moral, better citizens, and better people than Christians we know. Again, this leads us to respect and learn from non-Christians.

OUR DOCTRINE OF THE GREAT REVERSAL OF THE CROSS

Jesus won by losing, triumphed through defeat, and achieved all power through weakness and loss. He came not with a sword in his hands but with nails in them. He didn't slay his enemies, and while rebuking falsehood and calling for repentance, he nonetheless died forgiving his enemies. We, too, must regard even those who style themselves as our opponents to be potential friends or, at least, neighbors we can love.

[3] Larry W. Hurtado, *Destroyer of the Gods: Early Christian Distinctiveness in the Roman World* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2016).

PRACTICAL MEASURES

When speaking to other religious, ethnic, cultural, and political communities, Christians can employ a few practical steps.

Practice active listening. Active listening has two goals—to understand ourselves and to help the other person to feel understood. It means long periods of taking in new information and then beginning our response with, "So you are saying …?" If we summarize the other person's point, and they say, "I couldn't have put it better myself," we have actively listened. This type of listening helps the other person feel understood and helps the listener gain insight into both their and the other person's point of view before working out how to proceed in the conversation. If we act like we are listening but are in truth simply waiting to state our own opinion, it will be evident to the other party, and they will not feel as if we truly care what they think.

Look for shared, overlapping values based on common grace. What do we value that they also value? At the same time, we can also respectfully discuss issues on which we disagree in order to come to a better mutual understanding at the very least. In his book *Confident Pluralism*, professor of Law and Religion John Inazu says that relationships with those who hold differing values can be established and maintained by adopting three "civic practices."[4] (I paraphrase the definitions here, but his book offers a much deeper exploration.)

- **Tolerance:** First of all, tolerance *is not* indifference to what others believe. We may, and in some cases should, be appalled by another person's views. But tolerance *is* remembering that the person is just that—a human being, despite the view he or she holds. It is natural to want to exclude (to eliminate, dominate, assimilate, or abandon) people with repugnant views and to justify dehumanizing them and reducing them to caricatures. But tolerance separates the person—who should be treated with rights, dignity, and respect—from the views they hold.
- **Humility:** This *is not* a lack of confidence in one's own beliefs. It is not an attribute only for those who are unsure about the truth. (These individuals do not employ true humility anyway but rather the hesitancy that comes with uncertainty.) Humility *is* looking at our own views and admitting that, although they seem self-evident and rational to us, they are ultimately a matter of faith, and therefore there is a limit to how much we can prove to others. We can't objectively prove moral values to someone who doesn't share them. Recognizing this fact helps us to be open to learning what we can from another's perspective and keeps us from concluding that anyone who doesn't agree with us is a fool.
- **Patience:** While humility comes from looking at ourselves and recognizing the limits of our ability to prove our view to others, and tolerance comes from looking at the other person and remembering their full humanity, patience comes from hopefully looking ahead

[4] John D. Inazu, *Confident Pluralism: Surviving and Thriving Through Deep Difference* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2018), 81–129.

to the better society we could have if we bridge the distances between us. We should be slow to posit bad motives to others and think we've figured people out. We should not attribute a view to them that they may not hold, even if we think it is one that is consistent with their position. We should not critique them until we can present their position as compellingly as they can. The desire for a better future will help us patiently listen and seek to understand the other person.

Establish friendships with those living within your community as much as possible. Eat together. Simply showing up at social functions that other groups or individuals in the neighborhood are hosting can go a long way. We must get to know the people around us as individual persons, not just as representatives of opposing groups.

Know and network with the Christians who live in the area. We should do this even with those who may not go to our church. We must make it clear that we are not trying to pull them away from their congregation but rather are seeking to mobilize Christians for service in a particular place. It's important to strengthen ties and relationships with these individuals and begin studying the local neighborhood together.

Know and network with non-Christians who live in the area. As we speak with leaders of different ethnic, cultural, and religious communities, as well as government officials, we begin to learn about the community and its various needs. We should seek to discern the concerns of longtime residents, which are often different from those of newcomers. We can also seek to develop a few ongoing relationships or even a small group with non-believers with whom we have a good rapport.

After we've identified issues and spoken to various groups, we can seek to find ways to work together with them to improve the city (see the DNA paper "Justice" for more on this). What are the needs or issues the local community has, and how can we work together with other groups to solve them and make the neighborhood a better place to live?

ON FORGIVENESS

Inazu specified tolerance, humility, and patience as keys to establishing relationships across divides. But another crucial element in maintaining the relationships we start with Christians and non-Christians alike is forgiveness. We must never tire of repairing our relationships by forgiving others and repenting for our own missteps.

WHAT IS FORGIVENESS?

To forgive is to renounce revenge and be open to reconciliation. Revenge finds satisfaction in another's unhappiness, especially when that unhappiness is inflicted by us. Forgiveness, too, names the wrong and acknowledges that it is punishable rather than merely excusing it. (I'll speak more

on this task later.) But forgiving someone is also to acknowledge that they are a fellow sinner and to release them from the liability of our payback by absorbing the debt of the offense ourselves. It aims for reconciliation and the restoration of the relationship that was broken by the wrong.

What does it mean to absorb the debt of the offense? When speaking on forgiveness, Jesus uses the image of debts to describe the nature of sins (Matthew 6:12, 18:21–35). When someone seriously wrongs us, there is an unavoidable sense that the wrongdoer *owes* us. The wrong incurs an obligation, a liability, a debt that we are compelled to make the perpetrator pay. We exact this payment by hurting them, yelling at them, making them feel bad in some way, or even just waiting and hoping that something bad happens to them. Only after we see them suffer in some commensurate way do we sense that the debt has been paid, and the sense of obligation is gone. This sense of debt, liability, and obligation is impossible to escape. Anyone who denies it exists has simply not been wronged in any serious way.

This is why forgiveness means giving up the right to seek repayment from the one who harmed us. It must be recognized that forgiveness is a *form of voluntary suffering*. What does this mean? Think about how monetary debts work. If a friend breaks a lamp of mine that costs $50 to replace, the act of lamp-breaking incurs a debt of $50. If I let him replace the lamp, I get $50, and the debt is repaid. But if I forgive him for what he did, the debt does not somehow vanish into thin air. Instead, I absorb the cost of the lamp: either I will pay $50 to replace it, or I will lose the lighting in that room. Someone *always* pays the debt.

This is the case in all situations of wrongdoing, even those that don't involve money. When we are sinned against, we always lose *something*, whether it is happiness, reputation, peace of mind, a relationship, an opportunity, and so on. There are two things we might do after we've been sinned against. Imagine, for example, that someone has hurt our reputation. We may try to restore it by paying the other person back and vilifying them to ruin their reputation, as well as ours. Or we can forgive them, refuse to demand payback, and therefore absorb the damage to our reputation, which we will have to restore over time. There is no way to deal with it without suffering—either we make the perpetrator suffer for it until we feel things are even, or we forgive and suffer for it ourselves. This is why forgiveness is always extremely costly. It is emotionally expensive to be cordial to our offenders instead of seeking vengeance to relieve their debt. It takes blood, sweat, and tears.

We must also beware of the subtle ways we can try to exact payment in our relationship even after we try to forgive. We must be careful not to make cutting remarks and bring up the past over and over. We must not be more demanding or controlling of the person than we are with others. We should not diminish the offender in others' eyes by hinting about their shortcomings, gossiping about them, or directly slandering them. We must remember not to bad-mouth them to others under the guise of warning people about them or under the guise of seeking sympathy and support or sharing a hurt. We must refuse to indulge in ill-will in our hearts. That is, we mustn't continually replay the "scenes" of the wrong in our imagination to keep the sense of hurt fresh so we can stay actively hostile and feel virtuous. If we do these things, we still feel deep down that

the other person owes us, and we are punishing them with a self-righteous "mercy" that justifies us being cold to them in subtle ways and makes them feel small.

Rather than vilifying the offender in our imagination, we must recognize the common sinful humanity we share with them. Rather than rooting for them to fail, we pray positively for their growth. These things, as stated earlier, take significant effort. Many times we will not want to do them. Forgiveness, then, is granted before it is felt. It is a promise to refrain from the vengeful attitudes listed above and to pray for the perpetrator as we remind ourselves of God's grace to us. Though bearing the cost of the sin ourselves is extremely difficult and painful, forgiveness will deepen our character, free us to talk to and help the other person, and lead to love and peace rather than bitterness.

By bearing the cost of the sin, we walk the path of our Master (Colossians 3:13; Matthew 5:38–39, 18:21–22). It is typical for non-Christians today to say that Jesus' crucifixion makes no sense: "Why did Jesus have to die? Why couldn't God just forgive us?" But *no one* who has been deeply wronged can "just forgive"! As we've seen, when someone wrongs us, there are only two options: make them suffer, or forgive them by forsaking revenge and taking the suffering on ourselves. If *we* can't forgive without suffering, how much more must God suffer in order to forgive all of our sins? If we sense the obligation, debt, and injustice of sin in our soul, how much more does God know it? On the cross, God forgave us, and that was only possible if God suffered. On the cross, God's love satisfied his own justice by bearing the penalty for sin. There is never forgiveness without nails, thorns, sweat, and blood.

Internal and attitudinal forgiveness is *not* dependent on the response of the perpetrator. It is difficult to forgive in any case, but it can be *incredibly* difficult to forgive when the other person does not repent or even believe they need to repent. Christians have a duty to forgive regardless. Mark 11:25 shows that God requires forgiveness whether or not the offender has repented and has asked for it: "And when you stand praying, if you hold anything against anyone, forgive them." The verse does not say, "forgive them if they repent." It instructs us to forgive them then and there, right as we are praying.

In all efforts to forgive, we must look to God's example and remember both our poverty of spirit—the humility that comes from knowing our salvation is by sheer grace, not merit—and our wealth of spirit—the assurance of love that comes from knowing our salvation is by sheer grace, not merit.

When we understand and experience the gospel, it helps us embrace a life of forgiveness in two key ways. First, the humility that comes from recognizing our emotional poverty provides us with crucial insights. We can only stay bitter toward someone if we feel superior and believe we could never hurt anybody like we've been hurt. When Paul says he is the "chief" of sinners (1 Timothy 1:15 KJV), he does not exaggerate. He is saying that he is as capable of sin as the worst criminals are. To remain unforgiving means we remain unaware of our own need for forgiveness.

Second, the assurance of our emotional wealth also teaches us valuable lessons. If we are insecure in our identities, sins against us can shatter us and feel too grievous to possibly forgive. But

if we know God's love and forgiveness, there is a limit to how deeply another person can hurt us. He or she can't touch our *real* identity, wealth, and significance. The more we rejoice in our own forgiveness, the quicker we will be to forgive others. As Croatian theologian Miroslav Volf says:

> Forgiveness flounders because I exclude the enemy from the community of humans even as I exclude myself from the community of sinners. But no one can be in the presence of the God of the crucified Messiah for long without overcoming this double exclusion—without transposing the enemy from the sphere of monstrous inhumanity into the sphere of shared humanity and herself from the sphere of proud innocence into the sphere of common sinfulness. When one knows that the torturer will not eternally triumph over the victim, one is free to rediscover that person's humanity and imitate God's love for him. And when one knows that God's love is greater than all sin, one is free to see oneself ... and so rediscover one's own sinfulness.[5]

In Matthew 6:15, Jesus says, "But if you do not forgive others their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins." This does not mean that we can earn God's forgiveness through our own forgiving, but that we *can* disqualify ourselves from it. No heart that is truly repentant toward God could be unforgiving toward others. A lack of forgiveness toward others is the direct result of a lack of repentance toward God. And, as we know, we must repent in order to be saved (Acts 2:38).

PURSUING TRUTH IN LOVE

Yet we must not forget the earlier point about forgiveness naming wrongs and speaking truth. Contrary to what some may assume, this is a notable part of biblical forgiveness. The gospel calls us to speak the truth and honor what is right, yet to be endlessly forgiving as we do so, and to never give up on the goal of a reconciled, warm relationship. That is why Jesus tells his disciples in Luke 17:3–4 to "rebuke" the wrongdoer and forgive them if they repent. Many readers think that Jesus is allowing us to hold grudges against those who don't repent, but we cannot read Luke 17 to contradict Mark 11. Jesus is calling us here to both inner forgiveness *and* rebuking to correct. We must completely surrender the right to seek revenge, yet at the same time we must never overlook injustice and must seek to redress serious wrongdoings.

This is usually the very opposite of how we operate. Ordinarily, we are often reluctant to directly ask people to change their behavior and restore what has been broken. Instead, we often choose to act hateful and bitter to communicate our feelings of being slighted. The Bible calls us to do the exact opposite: we are to deeply forgive on the inside so as to have no desire for vengeance,

[5] Miroslav Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace: A Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness, and Reconciliation* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1996), 124.

but then we are to speak openly about what has happened, with a desire to help the person see what was done wrong.

In reality, inner forgiveness and outward correction work well together. Only if we have forgiven someone internally can we correct them unabusively without a desire to make them feel terrible. Only if we have already forgiven can our motive be to correct the person for God's sake, for justice's sake, for the community's sake, and for the person's sake. And only if we forgive on the inside will our speech have any hope of changing the perpetrator's heart. Otherwise, our words will be so filled with disdain and hostility that offenders will not listen to us.

Ultimately, to forgive on the inside and to correct on the outside are not incompatible actions because they are *both* acts of love. It is never an act of love to let a person get away with sin. It is not loving to the perpetrator, who continues to operate in the vise of the habit; nor to the others who will be wronged in the future; nor to God, who is grieved. This is a difficult path to walk, for the line between a moral indignation for God's sake and a self-righteous outrage because of hurt pride is very thin. To refuse to confront is not love but selfishness.

We are to speak the truth in love (Ephesians 4:15), and we are required to forgive in a way that honors justice, just as God's forgiveness does. But we must remember a crucial distinction: we are to pursue justice not for our sake (which comes awfully close to revenge), but for God's sake, for the community's sake, for future victims' sake, and even for the perpetrator's sake.

RECONCILIATION

When we forgive others based on the gospel's instruction, we can rebuild bridges that have been broken. I stated earlier that internal forgiveness is not dependent on the response of the perpetrator. The work of actual reconciliation, however, *is* dependent on both the wronged person practicing forgiveness and the repentance of the perpetrator (Luke 17:3–5). Forgiveness must first be practiced internally, but it can also be extended outwardly. Extending forgiveness to others pursues both justice and mercy together and independently, as both are forms of love. It holds out the offer of a reconciled relationship and, eventually, a restoration of trust. When parties respond to this offer in repentance, the bridge can be rebuilt.

WHEN TO RECONCILE

Jesus tells us that if we have been sinned against, we may need to go and speak to the offender. Remember that Luke 17:3–4 specified we have a duty to rebuke our brothers and sisters who sin. But *when* do we rebuke? Every time anyone wrongs us? 1 Peter 4:8 famously says that "love covers over a multitude of sins," and Proverbs 10:12 backs this up. This means we are not to be thin-skinned, and it would be wrong to bring up every time we have been, are being, or will be treated unjustly or insensitively. But passages like Matthew 18 and Luke 17 say there are times in which we should make an appeal and a complaint. When do we do so?

This is where Galatians 6:1 gives us guidance: "Brothers and sisters, if someone is caught in a sin, you who live by the Spirit should restore that person gently. But watch yourselves, or you also may be tempted." We should give correction under two conditions. First, we should correct when the sin is serious enough to sour or rupture our relationship with the offender. Matthew 18:15 indicates that the purpose of such a rebuke is to win our brother or sister over, or to rescue the relationship. This is implied in Galatians 6:2, which tells us that correcting someone is a way of "carrying each other's burdens." It is an expression of an interdependent relationship.

The second condition in which we should correct is when the sin against us is evidently part of a pattern of behavior that the other person is seriously mired in. Note that Galatians 6:1 specifies that we are to restore those *caught* in a sin. The image this verse gives us is that of someone trapped in a pattern of behavior that will be harmful to both themselves and others. In love, this pattern should be pointed out. We do it for the person's sake—to "restore" them. Our concern is their growth.

How do we do this? Galatians 6:1 tells us: *gently*. This could not be more important. If the motive of the correction is the growth of the person, then we will be loving and gentle. Verses 2 and 3 indicate that we should do this humbly. By performing the correction, we make ourselves servants. Ultimately, any love that is afraid to confront the beloved is not truly love but a selfish desire to *be* loved. This is selfishness by cowardice in that it puts our own desire for approval ahead of the other person's needs. This is not real love at all; it is loving the love we get from the person. True love is willing to confront and even to "lose" the beloved in the short term if there is a chance to help them.

Nevertheless, it is clear there are plenty of times in which we should *not* correct and seek an apology, even when we are owed one. The stronger a Christian we are, the less sensitive and easily hurt we will be. The more we experience the gospel, the more patient we will be with people who insult us, snub us, ignore us, or let us down in some way. While these actions may have immediately soured us to these people in the past, a mature Christian remembers times we have done the same to others or times when people who slight us are later revealed to have a lot of trouble in their minds and hearts. If we find that *any* wrongdoing immediately sours us toward someone and requires an apology, we should examine the level of our own emotional humility and emotional wealth in Christ. Love should cover over a multitude of sins (that is, *most* of them). We should be able to treat people warmly even if they owe us an apology by rights; we may not have corrected them because the slights were minor, the right time to speak about it has not come, or we don't know the person well enough to know if it is a major pattern in their life.

RECONCILED VS UNRECONCILED RELATIONSHIPS

An unreconciled relationship is one that harbors avoidance, coldness, and irritability (for example, when the same action being performed by another person doesn't disturb us as much as it does when *another* person does it). If we find ourselves avoiding, acting cold toward, or

being irritated with another person—or vice versa—then we are probably in an unreconciled relationship.

To say, "I forgive you" is not to say, "I trust you." We can sometimes believe that we haven't reconciled with an offender until we can completely trust them again. This is not the case. Forgiveness means a willingness to *try* to reestablish trust, but that reestablishment is always a process. The speed and degree of this restoration entails the re-creation of trust, and that takes time, depending on the nature and severity of the offenses involved. Until a person shows evidence of true change, we should *not* trust the person. To immediately re-trust a person with sinful habits could actually enable them to sin. Just because we don't (and shouldn't) trust someone who wronged us in the same way we did before the offense doesn't mean we have an unreconciled relationship with them.

This also applies to the people who owe us an apology but whose sins have been "covered over" by love, as stated above. A person who has let us down who hasn't been corrected is someone who has damaged our trust in minor ways. If he or she apologizes, it will likely restore trust and respect, but we can still have a civil and cordial relationship with them regardless of whether they apologize or not.

HOW CAN I RECONCILE WITH SOMEONE?

We can look at Matthew 5 and Matthew 18 as two different approaches to reconciliation. Matthew 5 shows what we do when we believe we have wronged someone else, while Matthew 18 shows what we do when we believe someone has wronged us. But it is also possible to look at these passages as two stages of the reconciliation process. Seldom does just one party bear all the blame for a tattered relationship. Reconciliation is almost always done best by both repenting *and* forgiving—by both admitting our own wrong and pointing out the wrong of the other. If we put these two approaches together, we can create a practical outline, as follows:

Stage 1: Begin by confessing anything you may have done wrong. When you forgive, begin with your own offenses. Even if you believe that your own behavior is no more than 5 percent of the problem, *start with your 5 percent!* Start by listing what you think *you* have done wrong, and ask the other person to add how they think you contributed to the breakdown in the relationship.

Here's an example of a few statements to start with: "I'm here because I don't like what has happened to our relationship (or friendship). It appears to me there is a problem between us; am I right? Here is what I believe I have contributed to the problem—where I've wronged you and contributed to the problem. Where else have I wronged you or contributed to the problem in your estimation?" If you genuinely have no idea what has gone wrong, you may have to simply offer to listen, and therefore you might say something like, "It appears to me that there is trouble between us, and I have offended you. Am I right? Please tell me specific ways I have wronged you. I am ready to listen."

Then, listen well to the criticism you've invited. Seek to distill this criticism into something clear and specific. Eventually, ask for as many specific examples as possible (to do this too quickly may seem defensive). If someone accuses you of bullying, for example, you need to discover what actual words, actions, or tones of voice strike the other person as bullying.

Here is a practical checklist for gathering criticism about yourself:

- Pray silently, asking God to give you wisdom and for you to sense his love for you.
- Even if it is through someone who is extremely flawed, assume that God is speaking to you through this situation and is showing you ways to be more careful about your behavior or to change it outright.
- Beware of being defensive. Don't explain yourself too quickly, even if you have a good answer or can show the person how they are mistaken. Be sure you don't interrupt or keep the person from expressing frustration. Show sympathy, even if you have been misunderstood.
- Always ask, "Is there anything else? I really want to know!" In stressful situations, it is easy for someone to hold back some of their complaints or concerns. Get them all out on the table, or you will be having this conversation again.
- Make it safe to criticize you. Support individual criticisms with empathetic statements such as, "That must have been hard; I see why you were concerned."
- Look for the needs of the critic that lie beneath the criticism—and be concerned for them.
- Then, respond to the criticism by not just apologizing but by asking for forgiveness. This is the moment to communicate your repentance and confession of sin. Admit it without excuses and without blaming any other circumstances. Even if there are exaggerations against you, extract the real fault in yourself and confess it. Remember, even if you think you contributed only 5 percent of the problem, admit that you were part of it! Provide plans to change your behavior, or at least communicate your intentions to avoid similar behavior in the future. Ask if there is anything you can do to restore trust. If you truly cannot see any validity in their criticism at all and find it groundless, ask if you can get back to them later after checking with others about the criticism.

Make sure to avoid over-expressions of just "how terrible I feel over what I've done!" Some confessions are manipulatively designed to relieve the confessor of any guilt or to garner sympathy from others. On the other hand, avoid being deadpan, lighthearted, or even flippant. Confession can be done in such a way that preserves pride, *technically* fulfills the requirement, and forces the other person to let you off the hook when you haven't shown any real contrition or emotional regret at all. Most of all, do not make a confession that is really an attack; for example, "If I upset you, I'm sorry." This actually communicates, "If you were a normal person, you wouldn't have gotten upset by what I did." Don't repent of something that you're not going to repent to God for or take concrete steps to change. Real repentance has three aspects: confession to God, confession to the person wronged, and the offering of a concrete plan for change that avoids the sin in the future (Luke 3:7–14).

After you have repented, turn to the issues that you honestly can't repent of as sins. About these, you have to say something along the lines of, "Please, accept my explanation for this. Here's how I see it. Can you see that my motive or meaning was different from what you inferred? Can you accept that I could have perceived this differently and had the motives I am describing? Is there some way, since we see this issue so differently, that we can avoid hurting each other like this again?"

Stage 2: If necessary, address ways the other person has wronged you. If you have done all of the steps above, you will often find that this elicits a confession from the other person without you having to ask for it. This is by far the best way to achieve reconciliation.

If the other person is not forthcoming, however, begin by saying something like, "From my point of view, it looks to me like you did *this*, and it affected me *this way*. I think it would be far better for all concerned if instead you did *this*. I am coming to ask you if my understanding is accurate or distorted. Correct me if I am wrong. Could you explain what happened?" Be sure that your list of things they have done is specific, not vague.

If the other person offers an apology, grant forgiveness—but avoid using the term unless it is asked for. To say, "I forgive you" may sound tremendously humiliating to someone, depending on the circumstances. It is far safer to say, "Let's put it in the past," or "Think no more of it."

Here are some general guidelines for this part of the process:

- Your tone of voice is extremely important. Have a loving and humble tone. An overly controlled tone that sounds too nice and calm may seem patronizing and be as infuriating as an outraged tone. Don't resort to flattery and fawning syrupiness or slip into abusive, angry tones.
- Attack the problem and not the person. For example, instead of calling someone thoughtless, point out that they have forgotten something after they had made repeated promises that they would not forget it.
- Suggest alternatives and solutions for alternative courses of action or behavior. Make sure all criticism is specific and constructive. Never say, "Don't do this" without also saying, "Instead, do this."
- Be aware that, at the heart of the discussion, you may discover an underlying goal or need that the other person is trying to meet that could be met in more constructive ways.
- Keep cultural differences in mind. One culture may consider your approach incredibly disrespectful and demeaning, even when you think you are being respectful.

WATCHING FROM THE SIDELINES

When two people within the church are in conflict with one another, it can wreak havoc in the hearts and lives of the Christians around them. The worst course of action to take (and, sadly, a common one) is to take sides in the dispute in a way typical of the world rather than suspending judgment, praying, and encouraging the parties toward reconciliation. It is hard not to sympathize with the party we know best. It is also hard for that person not to share their hurt with us in a way that does not vilify the other party in the conflict. As a result, we can have second- and third-order unreconciled relationships. That is, people who are friends with either party can begin to feel alienated from the "other side." The problem with this is obvious: there is no direct way to heal breaches like this. It is a spiritually poisonous situation. If we take sides in conflicts like

this, we let a bad report about another Christian pass into our heart and take root as distrust and hostility.

What should we do instead? First, see what James 4:10–11 says about giving bad reports: "Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will lift you up. Brothers and sisters, do not slander one another." Here, the verb "slander" simply means to "speak against" (*katalalein*). It is not necessarily a false report, just a report that undermines the listener's respect and love for the person being spoken about. The link of slander to pride (verse 10) shows that slander is not the humble evaluation of error or fault. Rather, slander involves the speaker acting as if they would *never* do the same thing. Non-slanderous evaluation is gentle, guarded, and always shows that the speaker senses how much they share the same frail humanity and sinful nature with the one being criticized. It shows a profound awareness of our own sin, as well.

James 5:9 also instructs us not to "grumble against one another." This refers to the kind of talk against someone that is not focused slander or a specific attack. It is hinting with not only words but also body language—shaking heads, groaning, and rolling eyes, all of which erode the love and respect for someone else.

Furthermore, see what Proverbs 17:9 says about receiving bad reports: "Whoever would foster love covers over an offense, but whoever repeats the matter separates close friends." The first thing to do when hearing or seeing something negative is to seek to "cover over" the offense rather than spread it around to others. This is not to sinfully hide someone's wrongs by sweeping them under the rug and pretending they never happened but rather avoiding gossip that needlessly destroys others' regard for the person.

If we receive bad reports and are tempted to pass them along when it is not warranted, we should first remember our own sinfulness. Proverbs 16:2 tells us that "All a person's ways seem pure to them, but motives are weighed by the Lord." To remember this keeps us from acting superior and speaking too strongly against people on the other side of a conflict. Remember, too, that there is always another side to the story. As Proverbs 18:17 says, "In a lawsuit the first to speak seems right, until someone comes forward and cross-examines." When we hear reports of others, we will rarely have all the facts. Thus, we should assume we have too little information to start drawing conclusions right away.

If we feel the problem is too great, and we can't keep it from destroying our regard for the person, we must go to them personally before we go to anyone else. In his commentary on Proverbs 25:7–10, Old Testament scholar Derek Kidner points out that sometimes to run to the neighbors first is "to run away from the duty of personal relationship—see Christ's clinching comment in Matthew 18:15b."[6] Jesus' instructions in the aforementioned passage read, "If your brother or sister sins, go and point out their fault, just between the two of you. If they listen to you, you have won them over." Galatians 6 says we are to restore others gently and in humility. In Matthew 18, Jesus says we should be persistent. If the person won't listen to us, we should take someone with us who they might listen to, in order to follow the Bible's command to reestablish broken relationships with one another.

[6] Derek Kidner, *Proverbs* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2018), 151.

ADDITIONAL READING RECOMMENDED BY CITY TO CITY

Cleveland, Christena. *Disunity in Christ: Uncovering the Hidden Forces that Keep Us Apart*. IVP, 2013.

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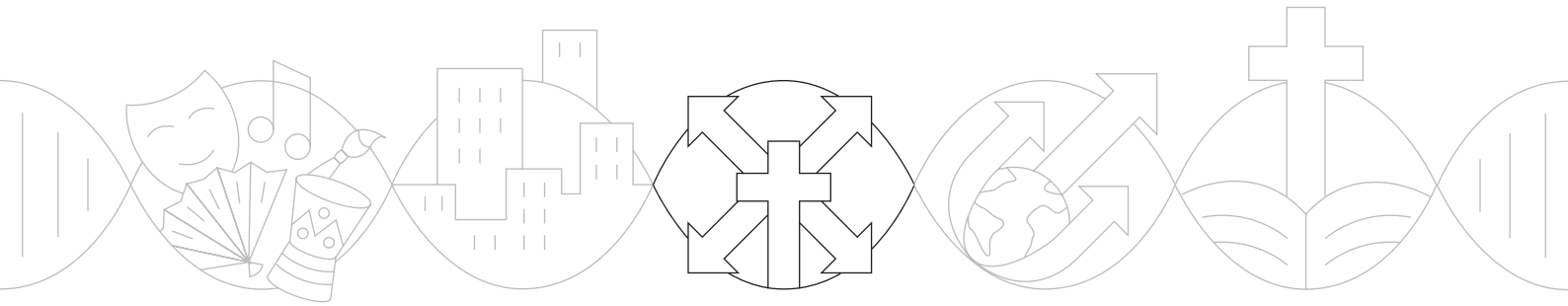
Van Opstal, Sandra M. *The Next Worship: Glorifying God in a Diverse World*. IVP, 2022.



Mission

Because the church exists not for itself but for Christ's kingdom in the world, we:

- *Celebrate and enrich our neighborhoods through forging authentic relationships, pursuing justice, and integrating faith and work.*
- *Disciple Christians and evangelize non-Christians through Christ-centered preaching, joyful worship, sacrificial service, and kingdom-centered prayer.*

PART THIRTEEN

Evangelism and Community

Evangelism is a landmark feature of the Christian faith and its churches. It is possible to plant churches with little or no evangelism to non-Christians, but such churches only grow by transferring believers from one congregation to another, colloquially known as "sheep stealing." Some transfer growth is inevitable when church planting, but the overall body of Christ does not expand and is not strengthened when the saints in a city simply circulate from one church to another. In order to grow the church at large, the individual churches we plant must grow through evangelizing people and seeing them become new believers.

Personal evangelism was the key to the original mission of the early church—that is, where every Christian in the church undertook personal evangelism with the individuals in their lives. This type of evangelism—rather than preaching evangelistically to large crowds or running evangelistic programs—is the focus of this paper. If even 10 to 15 percent of a congregation becomes active in evangelizing the people around them, the church will begin to see fruitful growth. But before we look at how to accomplish that, it is important to examine the gospel's role in evangelism and our motivation for it.

THE GOSPEL AND EVANGELISM

The main means for evangelism is not a method or a program but simply the motivation of the heart. When people fully grasp the gospel and its great truth, hope, and love, it paves the way for effective outreach.

First, the gospel removes pride. One of the greatest barriers to evangelistic effectiveness is the heavy-handed, abrasive, and defensive attitude with which believers often talk about their faith. The gospel should help us be sensitive and gentle yet clear and truthful. Its theology should remind us that, because common grace abounds and we are saved by God's grace instead of our own goodness, we can expect to find wisdom and compassion in some non-Christians that exceed our own. The gospel teaches us we are undeserving sinners, and thus we must be quick to treat others with deference and respect. Without this, we can easily turn evangelism into an act of reassuring ourselves that we are right. Nothing is less attractive than an attitude that tells people, "I'm right, and you're wrong."

Second, the gospel removes fear. The loving experience of the gospel can free us from an excessive need for human approval so that we have the courage to speak for Christ. While we *should* take care not to insult, offend, or hurt people, we can become too concerned with maintaining our reputation.

We fear being perceived as religious fanatics. However, an experience of God's love should make us more willing to take criticism and risk disapproval. Additionally, recognizing that evangelism is the work of the Holy Spirit—that it is God who opens hearts to his message (Acts 16:14)—alleviates our fears. When we evangelize, we are not initiating our own mission. We step into the mission of God, who sent his Son to win the lost and who now sends us as part of that mission (John 20:21).

Third, the gospel removes pessimism. The gospel should give us hope and confidence that *anyone* can come to faith in Christ. However, we may have a pervasive sense that Christianity is so unpalatable and offensive to people that no one but traditionally conservative or religious people will be interested. We may look at our friends who are highly disdainful of the Christian faith and think it would take a miracle for them to believe. But the gospel teaches us that "there is no one who seeks God" (Romans 3:10–11). If we don't believe the gospel can reach the depths of the human heart, we may look at some people and say, "They aren't the kind of people to *ever* become Christians." But what makes us think that *we* were ever the kind of person to become a Christian? If we ourselves believe, then we are each a miracle of grace. There are no unlikely candidates for the Christian faith. The fact that there is no *one* type of personality most suited to becoming a Christian only substantiates the truth of the gospel.

Fourth, the gospel removes indifference. The joyful effects of the gospel in our own lives give us energy for witness. If we really see how wonderful the gospel is, how can we keep it to ourselves? Here's the most uncomfortable question we can ask ourselves: how can we really love anyone if we keep the gospel a secret from them?

There are, then, four major reasons for evangelistic unfruitfulness: a lack of *sensitivity* (remedied by the humility the gospel gives us), a lack of *courage* (remedied by the gospel's boldness), a lack of *hope* (remedied by the gospel's power), and *indifference* (remedied by the gospel's love). If we read this and find ourselves saying, "I see that I *ought* to be humble, confident, hopeful, and joyful, but I'm not," then the problem is our heart. We may be tempted to think the problem is a lack of training, or that we just don't know what to say. These are valid concerns, especially when 1 Peter 3:15 says to "always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have." But the courage, gentleness, and respect of the Spirit dominate all else. The Spirit can use us regardless of how much we feel we've prepared or practiced. As John Stott said, "Nothing shuts the mouth, seals the lips, and ties the tongue like the secret poverty of our spiritual experience." If we have humility, courage, hope, and love for people, we will find a way to evangelize despite our reservations. Being equipped to answer all sorts of objections will likely help, but success is not dependent on them. Thus, the most important thing is to apply the gospel to our heart to prepare it for evangelism.

HOW DO WE EVANGELIZE?

The Christendom model for evangelism—which relies on people showing up in church either on their own or due to holidays, weddings, funerals, or an invitation from friends—is fast waning in

the West. Outside of the West, this was never the model. People will reject Christianity quickly if they do not personally process the Christian faith with someone they respect over an extended amount of time.

LEARNING FROM THE EARLY CHURCH

In British theologian Michael Green's seminal book *Evangelism in the Early Church*, he notes how historians have concluded that the explosive growth of early Christianity "was in reality accomplished by means of informal missionaries."[1] That is, Christian laypeople—not trained preachers and evangelists—carried out the mission of the church "not through formal preaching, but the informal" conversations "in homes and wine shops, on walks, and around market stalls … They did it naturally, enthusiastically."[2] The word *evangelizdomenoi* means "to gospelize," to tell people the good news about what Jesus did for us. In the book of Acts, everyone tells the good news—not only the apostles (5:42), but every Christian (8:4). And they do so endlessly (5:42).

It's clear from the New Testament and other historical documents that one of the main centers of Christian evangelism was in the *oikos*—the network of family, neighbors, and associates. In Roman society, the household was a complex institution—it did not merely include the nuclear family of two parents and their children. It also included several generations of the family, domestic servants and indentured slaves, freemen laborers and others with a business relationship with the family (the *clientela*), and trusted friends who regularly enjoyed the family's hospitality (the *amici*). All of a person's strongest relationships were found within the household. So, when a person became a Christian, it was in the household that they would get a serious hearing.

If the head of the household became a believer, the entire home became a ministry center where the gospel was taught to all its members and neighbors. Examples of this are many: Jason's home in Thessalonica (Acts 17:5), Titius Justus' home in Corinth (Acts 18:7), Philip's home in Caesarea (Acts 21:8), Lydia's and the jailer's homes in Philippi (Acts 16:15, 32–34), and Stephanus' home in Corinth (1 Corinthians 1:16, 16:15). The home could be used for prayer meetings (Acts 12:12), fellowship (Acts 21:7), a whole night of instruction and prayer (Acts 20:7), impromptu evangelistic gatherings (Acts 16:32), planned presentations of the gospel to friends and neighbors (Acts 10:22), following up with inquirers (Acts 18:26), and systematic teaching and instruction (Acts 5:42). If someone besides the head of the household became a Christian—the wife, children, slaves, or laborers—the gospel would spread more indirectly.[3]

Although public and household evangelism were incredibly important, we also know from both the Bible and early historical records that simple friendship was one of the main conduits of the gospel, as well. We see this in John 1 when Philip passes his knowledge of Jesus on to his friend Nathaniel. Green relates how Pantaenus led Clement of Alexandria to Christ, Justin led

[1] Adolph Harnack, quoted in Michael Green, *Evangelism in the Early Church*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2003), 243.

[2] Ibid., 243.

[3] Green sketches out the different ways the gospel moved through households, depending on who was the first convert. Ibid., 322ff.

Tatian, and Octavius led Minucius Felix—all through friendship, a relationship taken seriously by the ancients. Green gives an extended account of how the future Saint Gregory was won to faith by Origen, who was Gregory's tutor in philosophy. Origen did not keep the traditional distance between professor and pupil but opened his life to Gregory as a friend.[4]

In today's age, the rise of digital media—texting, using social media, and meeting remotely via video—certainly affects who is in our *oikos*. In one sense, the digital may strengthen the existing *oikos*. For example, when children go off to college today, the significant separation that used to take place between parents and their offspring is often not as stark. In some ways, the digital may create new *oikoi*, but some would argue that a network is not an *oikos* without physical, face-to-face community. We must pay attention to these developments and the implications they bear for how people network.

EVANGELISM REQUIRES CREDIBILITY-CREATING CONTEXTS

In the Bible, we see evangelism happening in the *oikos*. Modern Western people who are highly mobile and individualistic do not have the same tight extended network of family and friends that the ancients had, nor are our business associations as relational as they were then. (Today, they're primarily transactional.) Yet we are all still part of—even if in a looser form than the past—an *oikos*: our geographical neighbors, our colleagues, our extended family members, and our friendships (usually stemming from the other three categories). To early Christians, evangelism was not delegated to a department of the church or a program; it was stewardship of their whole relational and social location and of the people they knew and loved. We must practice it in the same way today.

But *oikos* evangelism will not happen without two contexts.

First, it needs the credibility-creating context of distinct *personal* character. Our personal character should exhibit the following attributes.

- **Integrity:** Believers must be scrupulously honest, transparent, and fair dealing.
- **Generosity:** Believers must be generous. As employers, we should take less personal profit than other business-owners so that employees have more pay and customers receive affordable prices. As citizens, we should be philanthropic and generous with our time and money, making sure to care for the needy. Whenever possible, we should live a humble lifestyle as opposed to an extravagant one.
- **Hospitality:** Believers must welcome others into their homes, especially neighbors and people with needs we can meet.
- **Sympathy:** Believers should not be ruthless in their business or personal dealings. We should be unusually willing to forgive and reconcile rather than being vengeful or spiteful. We should be prepared and willing to make sacrifices that help others.

[4] Ibid., 342ff.

- **Chastity:** Believers must live consistently with the biblical sex ethic. Outside of those with Christian convictions, few people view sex as something that should only take place between a husband and wife. Nevertheless, non-Christians often know that Christians adhere to this biblical standard. Thus, a Christian who lives inconsistently with this standard will damage their credibility.
- **Resilience:** If we make any effort to be involved in the lives of our neighbors, they will inevitably see how we handle adversity. To be calm and poised in the face of failure and disappointment is crucial to Christian witness.

Second, evangelism happens effectively in the credibility-creating context of distinct *community* character. Loving, mutually ministering communities can be established by being open to outsiders and devoting time to three categories of action.

- **Affirmation:** This category of action is centered on affirming one another's strengths, abilities and gifts (Romans 12:3–6, 10; James 5:9); affirming one another's equal importance in Jesus (Romans 15:7; 1 Corinthians 12:25; 1 Peter 5:5; James 2:1); and affirming one another through visible affection (Romans 16:16; James 1:19; 1 Thessalonians 3:12).
- **Sharing:** This category of action is about sharing one another's space, goods, and time (Romans 12:10; 1 Thessalonians 5:15; 1 Peter 4:9); sharing one another's needs and problems (Galatians 6:2; 1 Thessalonians 5:11); and sharing one another's beliefs and spirituality (Romans 12:16; Colossians 3:16; 1 Corinthians 11:33; Ephesians 5:19).
- **Serving:** This involves serving one another through accountability (James 5:16; Romans 15:14; Hebrews 3:13; Ephesians 4:15, 25); through forgiveness and reconciliation (Ephesians 4:2, 32; Matthew 5:23–24, 18:15); and serving one another's interests rather than our own (Romans 14:9; Hebrews 10:24; Galatians 5:13; Romans 15:1–2; Galatians 5:26; James 4:11; Romans 14:19).

For a Christian, there is no "friendship evangelism"—there is just friendship. We must employ the spirit of 1 Thessalonians 2:8: "Because we loved you so much, we were delighted to share with you not only the gospel of God but our lives as well." If we truly believe the gospel, evangelism naturally occurs *unless* we make a deliberate effort to hide who we are. Friends share their hearts with each other and do what's best for the other person. For a Christian, evangelism will organically arise within a friendship if we don't let our pride, fear, pessimism, and indifference prevent us from sharing our faith.

THE PASCAL MODEL FOR EVANGELISM: THE CONTENT OF THE PROCESS

Evangelism may include dramatic turning points, and we believe that there is a single point in time when a person passes from spiritual death to spiritual life through repentance and faith (though this is not always easy to discern). But in general, evangelism is a process and a highly

relational one at that. Seventeenth-century mathematician and philosopher Blaise Pascal outlines this sort of relational process in one of his famous *pensées*:

> Men despise religion. They hate it and are afraid it may be true. The cure for this is [1] first to show that religion is not contrary to reason, but worthy of reverence and respect. [2] Next make it attractive, make good men wish it were true, and [3] then show that it is.[5]

Pascal says here we should not jump too quickly into defending and expounding the gospel. First, we need to establish that it is at least worthy of their respect and time (*ethos*) and, second, that it offers a number of attractive qualities that would personally benefit them (*pathos*). These two things motivate people to then hear a case for what Christianity is and why it is true. In summation, Pascal's process for sharing the faith with someone is to gain their respect for it, show the attractiveness of it, demonstrate the truth of it, and present the content of it. This makes the gospel respectable, desirable, believable, and understandable.

GAINING RESPECT FOR CHRISTIANITY

How can we practically earn respect for Christianity? There are, at least, the following principles to follow:

- Establish friendships with non-Christians.
- Reveal our personal character (this is inevitable in any relationship).
- Connect Christianity to other individuals that the non-Christian respects.
- Connect Christianity to ideas, institutions, and projects that have credibility in our culture.
- Show intimate acquaintance with and respect for the non-Christian's difficulties, doubts, and problems.
- Demonstrate the existence of Christianity's many answers to intellectual and cultural objections even before delving into the content. Demonstrate their substance, strength, depth, and breadth.

It is worth nothing that due to cultural differences, some of these factors will be more important in certain contexts than others.

SHOWING THE DESIRABILITY OF CHRISTIANITY

How can we show the desirability of Christianity? We can, of course, offer personal testimony about the ways the gospel has helped us. We can also recommend informal discussions on the

[5] Blaise Pascal, *Pensée* 187, available at https://www.ccel.org/ccel/pascal/pensees.iv.html.

offers of Christianity, as well as books, articles, or videos that discuss them. Make the point that Christianity offers the following benefits that everyone needs to live a satisfied life:

- a meaning and purpose in life that can endure any suffering;
- a solution for guilt and shame (the sense that we aren't what we ought to be);
- a way to keep relationships flourishing through forgiveness;
- a fuller picture of the fleeting experiences of beauty and transcendence we sometimes glimpse;
- an ability to love our body as a genuine part of ourselves;
- an identity that doesn't crush us as we try to live up to it, or crush others by excluding them;
- an enduring contentment that does not change based on our circumstances;
- a hope that enables us to face the future and death itself;
- a basis for truth, morality, and justice that fits our deepest intuitions about them; and
- a sense of freedom that doesn't undermine our relationships and community.

As said before, certain cultures will prioritize some of these benefits over others.

SHOWING THE BELIEVABILITY OF CHRISTIANITY

How can we show that Christianity is true? Of course, different cultures object to different aspects of Christianity. We must know the list of our culture's main objections to Christianity and provide good answers. We do not need to absolutely refute every objection, but we can at least show that no objection proves Christianity can't be true. Then, we can explore Christianity's answers to these objections. The best way to do this might be meeting up to read, watch, or listen to material that is relevant to the discussion.

We must also know how to make a positive case for the truth of Christianity that fits our culture. Case-making varies according to the epistemology of the culture. (We will explore this later in the paper.) Again, read and listen to short presentations together. Be aware of how Christianity differs from other religions, from secularism, and from skepticism about any deity or transcendent reality. Know how to compare Christianity favorably to alternative worldviews.

DEMONSTRATING THE COMPREHENSIBILITY OF CHRISTIANITY

Lastly, how can we explain what the gospel is so that its uniqueness is understandable? To do this, we should spend time going through a "gospel curriculum," recognizing that no one can immediately grasp all the components of the gospel—the character of God, sin, Christ, Christ's work, redemption, and faith, to name a few. Here is a basic outline of the gospel's revelations to cover:

- **Why we are here:** the joy in both God and humanity at Creation, and the Triune God creating the world in love and happiness.
- **Who we are:** we are made for God, for worship, for joy. We are images of his glory.
- **What is wrong with the world:** the fallenness that now fractures everything. This covers sin, alienations, objective difficulties to overcome, and idolatry.
- **What won't put things right:** legalistic law-keeping or relativistic, truthless grace.
- **What will put things right:** the incarnation of God in man, Jesus Christ; Christ's atonement for our sins on the cross; his resurrection and ascension into God's kingdom, which is already-but-not-yet entirely; one day living in the City of God forever and the renewal of all creation.
- **What will put *us* right:** repentance and faith in Christ's salvation.
- **How we know all this:** faith, general revelation about human nature and the world around us, and biblical and historical accounts.

RELATIONAL EVANGELISM: THE FORM OF THE PROCESS

There are four main aspects to the process of relational evangelism. *Presence* deepens relationships to determine interest. *Hospitality* deepens conversations to show respectability and desirability. *Invitation* explores Christianity with someone one-on-one to find it believable and understandable. *Community* gets a person involved in the body of Christian believers.

PRESENCE: DEEPENING RELATIONSHIPS

The goal of presence is to develop non-superficial relationships with our neighbors, colleagues, and others, primarily in order to love them but also to create a basis for conversations about faith and life with them. This involves going out of our way to eat with them, taking frequent walks in our neighborhood to meet new people, and being regular. "Being regular" means frequenting the local establishments, such as grocery stores, hairdressers, coffee shops, and the like to establish familiarity with the community. We must find ways to get to know others in our building or on our block—through exchanges in laundry rooms, resident meetings, merely passing by each other, and other situations. Find a hobby to do with others. For example, we don't need to form a Christian backpacking club—we can join an existing one. Make friends with colleagues, volunteer in programs alongside other city residents, and participate in city events: fundraisers, festivals, clean-ups, summer shows, concerts. If you have children, be involved at the school, and get to know other parents.

Look out for neighbors who live on their own (especially elderly ones) and find ways of being of service. Be hospitable to neighbors—when appropriate, invite them over for a meal. Notice the

people who seem to be most open to a deeper relationship. Bring them into more routine hospitality and sustained conversations about life and faith.

It is not necessary for a believer to do all these things all the time. Start at the beginning of the list and progress through it to try different things. When you find one practice that significantly helps you develop good relationships with non-believers, concentrate on that one.

HOSPITALITY: DEEPENING CONVERSATIONS

Hospitality involves inviting others to our home or to get together in a "third space" (somewhere besides the home and the workplace) with regularity. It also serves others and builds a respect for Christianity by demonstrating the attractiveness of the faith.

In order to garner someone's attention and help them believe Christianity is worth their time, we must learn the narratives that guide their life. These are their main sources of meaning, identity, freedom, and happiness. Throughout the process of learning about their lives, we can let them know of our Christian faith in natural ways (simply mentioning church attendance or Christian beliefs and practices casually). Learn their worldview—their views of human nature, God, Christian beliefs, morality, and knowledge. When we have an opportunity to share our own view, we can share why we believe in Christianity and find it coherent, relevant, and worthwhile. We should also take care to ask about their experiences with faith and the church and simply listen appreciatively and sympathetically. As we listen well to someone's challenges, we can mention that we will pray regularly for them. When we share our own personal issues, we can mention that our faith helps us find the strength or forgiveness to overcome them.

If the person is interested in talking more about Christianity, we can share more about our testimony of Christian experience, offer resources on Christian responses to our present issues, or initiate a discussion about a friend's biggest problems or objections to Christianity. We should always remember to listen respectfully and offer materials to work through and discuss if they are interested in learning more. If they are open to learning more about the character of Jesus directly, reading through one of the four Gospels is a good option.

Making Christianity attractive is not to make someone believe it is true but to help someone think it would be *great* if it were true. We can share the hope that Christianity offers by pointing out that we all live for something, and often this "something" does not save us or help us when we experience suffering and hardship. However, Christianity gives us something to live for that suffering can't destroy. Here are some of the ways the gospel fulfills us where the world fails us.

Satisfaction. Everyone must find a sense of satisfaction in life. Christianity gives a satisfaction that is not based on changing circumstances. The things of this earth may satisfy us at times, but they will inevitably fail us at some point, leaving us feeling empty and helpless. But God and his love for us will never falter. Indeed, a belief in God gives context to all of the beauty we experience that cannot be accounted for through evolutionary biology. When all else lets us down, God is there.

Freedom. Modern culture craves freedom and defines it as unrestricted independence. But this understanding poses a great problem for enduring relationships, and this is the reason that many today feel isolated and lonely despite having more agency in their lives than ever before. Christianity offers a unique view of freedom that liberates us from being a slave to our own desires and allows us to maintain healthy, connected relationships with those around us.

Identity. Throughout history, the world has long prescribed identities to people based on their duties in life, which can cast human beings as little more than a means to an end, separate them into unhealthy social strata, and oppress them. Today, Western culture has concocted the idea of the modern identity, which is based entirely on our individual desires and self-expression. But this has proved the most fragile and unstable of all identities, as it inevitably leaves us feeling unconfident in our ability to save ourselves, unreconciled with those outside of our own lived experiences, and unsure of any objective truths about our own nature. People with this sort of self-developed identity will experience internal contradictions between their desires. When they give such an identity the burden of supplying their self-worth and giving them the hope to live, they find that it has to be performed, justified, and rationalized day in and day out—a futile effort that is endlessly exhausting. And no matter what shape someone's bravely chosen identity takes, they will never receive enough affirmation from others to fully overcome their sense of insecurity and inadequacy.

Christianity offers an identity that is received, not achieved, but this is not validated by anyone else, not even ourselves. God himself has defined our worth and natural identity, which provides us with hope, humility, self-worth, and clarity.

Resolution for shame. Modern life gives us no way to deal with guilt because it gives no way to judge between true and false guilt. Thus, there is no way to truly absolve our guilt and the feelings of shame we get from it. Today, various therapies seek to deconstruct guilt and remove it from the equation: "It is not anyone's place to judge your actions and behavior." But we know we can't get off this easily. No matter how many times we try to justify ourselves by saying the opinions of others don't matter, we will still experience a persistent and indelible sense of guilt. Christianity provides explanations for our feelings of guilt and offers ways to work through them to become better people and receive forgiveness. It provides a balance of truth and grace that does not crush us under a weight of expectation nor blindly approve of our poor decisions and actions.

Reconciliation. The secular, digital world is losing the ability to apologize, forgive, and reconcile. Now more than ever, disagreeing with someone can lead to feelings of woundedness, hateful words, and the demonization of those who hold alternate viewpoints. If someone outright wrongs us, our first inclination may be to totally write them off and treat them as an enemy. This behavior, of course, does not satisfy us, and often leaves us feeling hurt, angry, and vulnerable. Instead of responding to disagreement, offense, or strife in ways that destroy our relationships, Christianity offers guidance on how to forgive and reconcile with others in healthy ways that pursue justice, truth, and mercy.

Romantic love. We know we need relationships with others. And in addition to those, countless individuals feel a deep desire to romantically love another person more than anyone else. But why do so many people struggle to have a relationship like this? Why is sex such a complicated and emotionally volatile matter when so many want it to be casual and noncommittal? Today, many relationships function transactionally, where either party feels free to leave as soon as they feel their desires are not being met. The desire for romantic companionship directly contradicts the desire for unrestricted individualism and a self-developed identity. Christianity provides a framework for a romantic love that is selfless and committed, yet far more fulfilling than any of culture's freewheeling alternatives.

Morality and justice. The secular world insists that all moral values are socially constructed and relative, yet it longs for justice and says we have a moral obligation to pursue it. The obvious contradiction here is the tension between people's professed relativism and their abiding sense of justice. How are we to determine right and wrong? If all moral norms are socially constructed, why should those who pursue justice expect their standard to be honored by anyone else? If moral standards are just the product of evolution, what's wrong with oppressing everyone we meet as much as we can? Christianity provides a biblical mandate for gospel-based justice and clearly defines right and wrong so that we do not have to fumble around in the dark to discern good and evil—or attempt to deconstruct them entirely.

Hope. How do we have any hope for the future? If we do not have a guarantee that the days to come will be any better than our current situation, how will we go on? How do we face the fact that we will one day die and be gone from this earth? The death of loved ones and the sense of our own impending death are weighty matters that all humans must work through, but Christianity gives us the immense hope of a day when all that is wrong will be made right, and we may live in eternity forever.

INVITATION AND COMMUNITY: OFFERING TO EXPLORE CHRISTIANITY'S INTRICACIES WITH OTHERS

The goals of invitation and community are to continue connecting others to the unique offers of Christianity and to explore Christianity's intricacies with them. Here, we may look at why it can be believed (its verification and demonstration), what it is (the gospel), and how to commit oneself to Christ.

There are three modes of doing this.

- **Reading together:** This entails reading and listening to resources with them one-on-one.
- **Coming together:** This entails getting them involved in Christian community and introduces them to other Christians, perhaps by way of inviting them to small groups, services, or other events and gatherings.
- **Investigating together:** This entails them committing to a sustained course of study or group where they can process the claims of Christianity.

A CASE STUDY OF THE FIRST MONTHS OF AN EVANGELISTIC CHURCH PLANTER

As one example of how we might apply the principles of presence, hospitality, invitation, and community, below is how an evangelistic church planter might engage in evangelization over a few months.

- **Presence:** The planter establishes sixty face-to-face relationships with non-Christians.
- **Hospitality:** The planter has twenty-five of these people over to their home and goes to dinner with fifteen others.
- **Invitation:** Fifteen of these people show interest in doing formal or informal studying with the planter.
- **Community:** Eight of these people join Christians in three different small groups that study and investigate Christianity.
- **Result:** Six people profess faith and share it with their *oikos*. A new cycle of small groups investigating Christian claims begins. Now, there are eighteen non-Christians in five groups.

PERSUASION IN EVANGELISM

We cannot say that the Christian should make no arguments or that they deploy no strategies for changing people's minds. In 2 Corinthians 5:11 and 10:5, Paul says he refutes arguments. Acts speaks of him "reasoning" with non-Christians (see Acts 17:2, 17) and uses a Greek word that refers to dialogue for the sake of argument. Acts 17:18 says the philosophers "debated" with Paul as well.

Aristotle famously declared that there were three aspects of persuasion—*logos*, *pathos*, and *ethos*. He argued that people are persuaded when their reason is appealed to (*logos*), their emotions and passions are appealed to (*pathos*), *and* if the speaker's personal character seems trustworthy (*ethos*). Put another way, persuasion has to do with what we say (the logic of it), how we say it (the feelings we use and appeal to), and who says it (the qualities of the one making the argument). While there is no single biblical passage that pulls these together, these three aspects of persuasion are acknowledged in Scripture.

REASONING TO MINDS

Logos is basic to verbal communication, and therefore to evangelism, for evangelism is irreducibly verbal (Romans 10:17 says "faith comes from hearing the message"; see also 2 Corinthians 10:5; Acts 20:24; Matthew 28:19–20). The aphorism "Preach the gospel—use words if necessary" is a mistaken overstatement. Kind and loving deeds are necessary but insufficient to bring someone

to faith. Paul reasoned with people, such as in Acts 18:4: "Every Sabbath he reasoned in the synagogue, trying to persuade Jews and Greeks." Paul not only did this with people who already believed Scripture but also with those in the marketplace who did not (Acts 17:17). We will examine the basics of *logos* persuasion later on in the paper.

APPEALING TO HEARTS

For the purposes of persuasion, it is just as important to use *pathos*—speaking *from* and *to* the heart—as it is to speak from and to the mind. We are to make people feel loved as we speak to them. Jude 1:22 instructs us to "Be merciful to those who doubt." Likewise, 2 Timothy 2:24–26 reads, "And the Lord's servant must not be quarrelsome but must be kind to everyone, able to teach, not resentful. Opponents must be gently instructed, in the hope that God will grant them repentance leading them to a knowledge of the truth, and that they will come to their senses … ."

We are also to show—without doing it *for* show—how profoundly Christ has reshaped our lives and how he means the world to us. As Colossians 1:28–29 reads, "He is the one we proclaim, admonishing and teaching everyone with all wisdom, so that we may present everyone fully mature in Christ. To this end I strenuously contend with all the energy Christ so powerfully works in me."

We are to not only use logic but images and metaphors that capture the imagination and the heart. Jesus spoke not just in propositions but also in parables. Humans are not computers, and so our presentation of the gospel should address personal and emotional concerns about identity, purpose, contentment, suffering, guilt, loneliness, anxiety, and anger.

ESTABLISHING TRUST

The evangelist's very self—their *ethos*—is also a part of their communication. The fact is that we tend to believe people who capture our trust, whom we find attractive, and whose friendship we would value. The most plausible ideas always seem to come from people we like and whom we want to like us. What does this mean?

First, it means people will not be convinced by a speaker's brilliant presentation if they think the person is hypocritical, abusive, deceitful, or otherwise objectionable in their personal life. Likewise, people will not be convinced by a speaker's presentation if they don't think the speaker understands the audience's situation. Bad character and being out of touch undermine persuasiveness. All the *logos* and *pathos* in the world cannot overcome a lack of *ethos*—a lack of perceived trustworthiness.

Trust is mainly a matter of capital. The main meaning of the word "capital" refers to financial wealth, but there are other kinds of wealth, as well. For example, someone with social capital has relationships with people who have power. Someone with cultural or "symbolic" capital might

have high education, relationships with trusted institutions, academic or vocational credentials, or experienced knowledge of the culture. Paul invokes such capital in Acts 22:3 when he tells his audience, "I am a Jew, born in Tarsus of Cilicia, but brought up in this city. I studied under Gamaliel and was thoroughly trained in the law of our ancestors. I was just as zealous for God as any of you are today."

But the greatest persuasion of all is the capital of character. We Christians are to be living letters: "a letter from Christ, the result of our ministry, written not with ink but with the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone but on tablets of human hearts" (2 Corinthians 3:3). Jesus says that the world will reject our message, no matter how well-crafted and accurate it is, if our message is not backed up by the character of our lives. If we are not loving each other as Christians—if we are not presenting a human community of unity and love that overcomes the barriers that divide the world—the world will not believe our gospel message (John 13:35, 17:23).

Nevertheless, too many people "convert" because they are swept up in *ethos* and *pathos*. That is, they profess faith because their emotions are engaged, and they are convinced of the trustworthiness of particular Christians. These people are often baptized and caught up in a whirl of Christian activities in which they are told what they must believe but not *why* they should believe it. *Logos* is neglected. The fact is that many stories of deconstruction—people "unconverting" from Christianity—reveal a foundation of disillusionment with leaders and congregants that were thought trustworthy. In a case like this, many people believe Jesus rose from the dead because Pastor X told them so; they never worked out the reasons for themselves. If Pastor X turns out to be a bully, these people's faith begins to fall apart. Why? Because it was based too much on *ethos*.

CULTURES OF PERSUASION

As noted in chapter ten of my book *Center Church*, missiologist David Hesselgrave notes three epistemological categories adopted by different cultures.[6] He calls them "Western" (or "Conceptual"), "Chinese" (or "Concrete Relational"), and "Indian" (or "Intuitional") approaches.[7]

The Conceptual approach says that people make decisions and arrive at convictions through reason, scholarship, and science.

The Concrete Relational approach says that people make decisions and arrive at convictions through relationships. Ultimately, truth is what works for the individual and what their friends and trusted associates say.

The Intuitional approach says that people make decisions and arrive at convictions through insight and experience. Ultimately, truth is what feels intuitively right to the individual and fits their deepest feelings.

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[6] Timothy Keller, *Center Church: Doing Balanced, Gospel-Centered Ministry in Your City* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2012), 122.

[7] David J. Hesselgrave, *Communicating Christ Cross-Culturally: An Introduction to Missionary Communication* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1978), 198–236.

Depending on the culture's epistemology, certain aspects of Christianity may seem more persuasive than others. If someone with a Conceptual approach asks why they should be a Christian, a fitting answer may be that there are many good reasons to do so. If someone with a Concrete Relational approach asks why they should be a Christian, a fitting answer may be to show the sense of community the body of Christ offers as a good, loving people. If someone with an Intuitional approach asks why they should be a Christian, a fitting answer may be to show how we have experienced God's love, power, and joy ourselves, and that he can do the same for them.

While each particular culture tends to emphasize one of these attitudes over the others, it appears that all people and all cultures are to some degree reliant on all three—reason, feeling, and social confirmation—to determine what they know. *Logos*, *pathos*, and *ethos* are always present in our minds and hearts as we come to conclusions about life. The Bible, as we saw above, incorporates all three aspects when communicating knowledge about God.[8] Unless we eventually speak to each of these three matters, we are not communicating all the biblical bases for truth. At the same time, we do want to contextualize our interactions with our audience. To accomplish this, we can begin with one of the approaches above, depending on the person we are trying to reach. But we must eventually introduce them to the other aspects of biblical truth and knowledge of God to deepen their faith and understanding of the gospel. Focusing too much on one epistemological approach may even cause us to over-adapt to the culture and dilute the gospel message as a result.

LOGOS PERSUASION BASICS

Note: The following strategy is found in the DNA paper "Contextualization" as a biblical model of persuasion. It is also found in the DNA paper "Cultural Engagement" as a model of engagement for subversive fulfillment and in chapter ten of *Center Church* as a model of using a non-believer's existing beliefs to persuade them to accept other, biblical, beliefs.[9] I believe that expressing this basic strategy in multiple ways, using somewhat different metaphors, is clarifying.

The basic approach to the *logos*-based persuasion of a non-believer, which I believe is transcultural, can be put like this:

First, we find something the non-believer already believes that, by common grace, is also taught in the Bible. We'll call this belief "X." Then, we show that another belief, "Y," can be or must be derived from X as its premise. If they believe X, why aren't they willing to believe Y? The non-believer will accept Y, or at least give genuine consideration to it, if they see it can be demonstrated on the basis of their own opinions. Presenting compelling arguments for a new idea is primarily a matter of deducing the new idea from other opinions that are already accepted.

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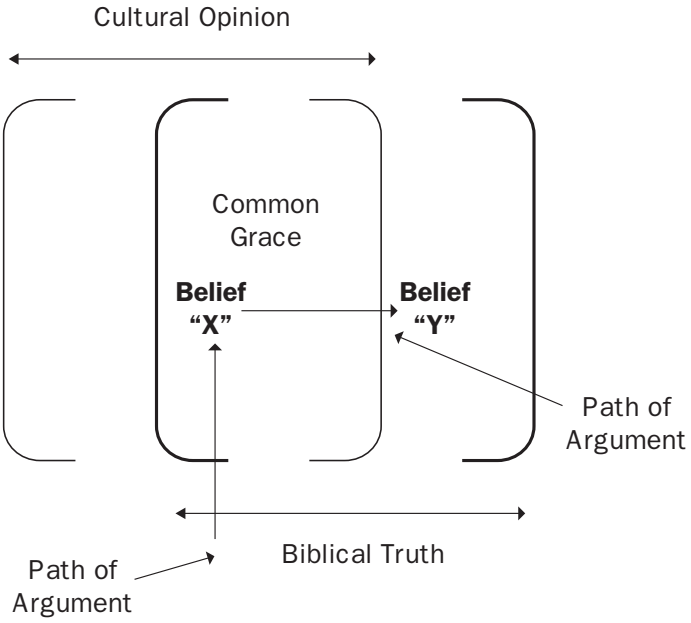
[8] See John M. Frame, *The Doctrine of the Knowledge of God*, part of the "A Theology of Lordship" series (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 1987) for a fascinating biblical-theological argument that in the Triune God's universe, knowledge always reflects this three-fold character. He argues that philosophical epistemology tends to be rationalist, subjectivist, or empiricist. He points out that Jesus is Prophet (*logos*), Priest (*pathos*), and King (*ethos*).

[9] Keller, *Center Church*, 123–125.

The theological basis for this principle is this: since all non-believers live somewhat inconsistently with the truth they grasp (Romans 1:18–21), there will always be Xs (genuine truths non-believers accept) and Ys (genuine truths that follow from X but are suppressed by our sinful human hearts).



If You Believe "X" (Common Grace), Why Not Believe "Y" (Biblical Truth)?

When we read the book of Acts, or even the Gospels, we see that the gospel is not presented the same way each time. Jesus does not approach the Samaritan woman at the well the way he approaches the rich young ruler or Nicodemus. Paul changes his gospel presentations drastically throughout his travels. Why? Since the gospel itself is unchanging, the changes in its presentation must be based on the differences in the audience—in what they believe (and don't believe) already. Put another way, each group has different things in its "X Column" and "Y Column." An interesting example of this is Paul's repeated reference to the resurrection whenever hostile Jewish authorities confront him. He always singles out the Pharisees among them and says, "You believe in the resurrection of the dead? So do I! And only the gospel fulfills this hope we have in common" (see Acts 23:6–9, 26:6–8, and 28:20). Over and over, Paul's common ground with Jewish leaders was their shared belief in the resurrection.

In each case, Paul does not merely confront people about their false beliefs. He enters into their belief system to find something that is approximately true according to what the Bible says, and then uses it to push them toward faith in Christ. This practice is to say, "If you believe this (and you are right to believe it), then why don't you believe *that*?" Paul does not say, "I'm right, and you are totally wrong." He says, "You are right about something—and you aspire to a good thing

in that—but your other beliefs contradict this and will not help you fulfill your best longings. Let me show you how to resolve this."

MOBILIZING INDIVIDUALS FOR EVANGELISM

As noted throughout this paper, the key to evangelism is not great speakers and programs but a proportion of a congregation (say, 10 to 15 percent) actively and intentionally seeking to develop relationships in which evangelism can occur. Here are some principles to keep in mind when mobilizing individuals for evangelism.

Remember that evangelism is *relational, not transactional*. There is always a danger of viewing people as projects, as people we relate to not out of love but to pursue our agenda. Ultimately, we should not talk of "friendship evangelism," but just *friendship with transparency*. In other words, Christians should simply love people as friends and not hide who they are. Evangelism then happens organically. One of the most basic ways to mobilize laypeople for evangelism *and* prevent them from objectifying non-Christians as projects is to ask each Christian to pray for two to five non-believers every day for a few weeks—specifically for their wellbeing and salvation. This develops genuine concern for the individuals, turns their hearts toward this part of their *oikos*, and frequently leads to great conversations about faith.

While evangelism should be relational instead of transactional, it must also be *intentional, not merely spontaneous*. The reality is that, as believers, we often find ourselves too busy to deepen relationships with strangers and non-believers unless we are motivated to do so by biblical calls to be a witness, be salt and light, and so forth. The local congregation needs to find ways to identify intentionally evangelistic members and bring them into a regular fellowship where they are given training and resources, such as answering objections to Christianity. They also need support from their pastors and peers so that they know they are not undertaking the task of evangelism all on their own.

What does such pastoral support involve?

- The pastor should demonstrate how to talk to people about faith issues and how to pray for them.
- The pastor must be clear that reaching out to friends and colleagues does not necessarily mean sharing a complete presentation of the gospel with them. Evangelizers shouldn't worry that all of their efforts rely on this. Sharing Christ with someone is a process. What we need is not knowledge but honesty and some courage.
- The pastor needs to be available to answer personal questions about issues that church members confront when they have discussions with their friends.
- The pastor must be a model of relational integrity for the rest of the congregation. People should see them deeply involved in the city and in relationships with their neighbors.
- The pastor should regularly meet with lay ministers to talk about what is happening in

their relationships. This offers not only a chance to celebrate and encourage one another about what is happening, but also a way to hold one another accountable in thinking about our relationships with a ministry mindset and to keep reaching out and opening up to people.

CREATING COMMUNITY FOR EVANGELISM

Crucial to congregational evangelism is the creation of an extremely hospitable, loving, worshiping Christian community that is open to and inclusive of non-believers. The church should be a place in which non-believers feel welcomed and where they can process the claims of Christ over a period of time. Despite the obvious fact that non-believers cannot be formal members of a church who take vows, get baptized, and the like, they can still feel accepted and loved by the community. Non-believers must be given love, support, and practical help just as Christian members receive. This kind of community is created in at least three ways:

- **The conversation strategy:** Doubters and doubts are welcome and worked into all the teaching. Christians don't code-switch by speaking one way to each other and another way to non-believers. Christians speak in ways that non-believers find cogent.
- **The combination strategy:** Non-believers are shown a community that combines things other communities cannot: genuine love, kindness, and gentleness, with unflinching belief in truth. There is concern for both the conversion of souls and social justice, and there are many other biblical emphases that violate the world's boxes and categories.
- **The capital conversion strategy:** Speakers and teachers earn credibility by showing acquaintance with authorities, writings, beliefs, and philosophies that command the respect of the non-believer. They seek to show how biblical truth completes the aspirations of our non-believing culture's worldviews and resolves their contradictions.

The strategic use of specific *venues and spaces* can also help create a hospitable Christian community that is open to and inclusive of non-believers.[10] The following examples are venues and spaces that many churches already use. The question is how to design these spaces with the inclusion of non-believers in mind—and how to help direct existing believers to intentionally and lovingly engage non-Christians in these spaces.

Intimate Spaces (2–4 people): These are usually discussion groups specifically formed to incorporate non-believers. They could be book clubs, Bible studies, or have many other foci. They are small enough to allow non-Christians to go at their own pace, direct the conversation topics, and best of all gain trust with believers. For many non-believers, anything larger than this (such

[10] The terms used below are taken from City to City trainer Robert Elkin's material on evangelistic pathways, and are based on the work of Edward T. Hall, *Handbook for Proxemic Research* (New York: Anchor Books, 1974) and Joseph Myers, *The Search to Belong: Rethinking Intimacy, Community, and Small Groups* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2003).

as being invited to church services or some other event) is a bridge too far, both in the vulnerability they may feel and in the difficulty they may have in understanding what is going on.

Personal Spaces (5–12 people): These are usually house churches or cell groups that are formed for the purpose of prayer, study, and fellowship, but which can be deliberately shaped to regularly include non-Christians and to draw in new non-believers. They ordinarily meet regularly—at least every three weeks.

Social Spaces (20–50 people): These are usually what are called "affinity groups" that do not meet as regularly but share some common interest or attribute. It may be church members in a neighborhood who meet quarterly to eat together, artists who meet regularly to talk of their work, mothers who meet to talk about parenting, or volunteers who work at a local shelter or ministry to the poor, and so on. These, too, can be not only inclusive of non-believers but also sometimes led by them.

Public Spaces (70+ people): These may be larger gatherings that are good for non-Christians to attend. There is almost an infinite variety of these, but here is a small selection: a directly evangelistic or apologetic event with a good speaker who knows the particular non-Christian audience; a concert or presentation of art that has Christian implications but is not overtly evangelistic; a dialogue between a Christian and a non-Christian speaker on a particular subject of interest; inviting leaders of a local organization that meets needs in the neighborhood to address interested members of the church as well as non-believers in the community; or meetings hosted by the church in which others in the community meet to talk about neighborhood needs.

Intentional Spaces (a variety of sizes): Churches can develop a course or space for inquirers of Christianity who show real interest in learning about the faith.

ADDITIONAL READING RECOMMENDED BY CITY TO CITY

Barna Group. *Reviving Evangelism: Current Realities That Demand a New Vision for Sharing Faith*. 2019.

Brooks, Jonathan, and Sho Baraka. *Church Forsaken: Practicing Presence in Neglected Neighborhoods*. IVP, 2018.

Escobar, Samuel. *The New Global Mission: The Gospel from Everywhere to Everyone*. IVP, 2003.

Toren, Benno van den, and Kang-San Tan. *Humble Confidence: A Model for Interfaith Apologetics*. IVP Academic, 2022.

PART FOURTEEN

Justice

After the social upheavals in the United States in 2020 over racial injustice, I returned to the Bible for a thorough study of justice. I had written the book *Generous Justice* ten years prior, but I wanted to study the relevant scriptural texts again with fresh eyes.[1] The result was a four-part series on justice and race published on the Gospel in Life website, which came out to over 37,000 words (almost as long as *Generous Justice* itself).[2] While I'm glad for global ministry leaders to read that material, it was intentionally written for an American context. In this paper, I will provide a distillation and summary of those articles in a form that is more useful for global audiences, as well as add some thoughts on local ministry that are not in other books or resources available to City to City leaders.

THE GOD OF JUSTICE

Biblical justice is rooted in the very character of God. In fact, it is an outworking of that character. God's justice is both retributive and restorative. He metes out punishment to those who have perpetrated wrongs and does not spare the wicked (Ezekiel 7:4, 9, 27, 8:18, 9:10). But he will also restore and renew all things so there is no more evil, suffering, or death (Matthew 19:28). God not only punishes evildoing, such as "put[ting] an innocent or honest person to death … accept[ing] a bribe … oppress[ing] a foreigner" (Exodus 23:7–9), but he also "raises victims of injustice to a position of honor and well-being."[3] Therefore, God's restorative justice "is not, like his anger, opposed to his steadfast love but is closely akin and synonymous with it." His justice is "simultaneously the manifestation of his grace" (Psalm 97:11–12, 112:3–6, 116:5, 118:15–19).[4] Both his retributive and remunerative justice will come to fulfillment at the end of history, and we will live in a new heaven and new earth filled with perfect justice (2 Peter 3:13).

What exactly is justice, according to the Bible? The simplest way to define it would be "right relationships." To be more specific, we could say, "living in such a way that gives others their due as beings created by God." This means both retributive justice, in which we necessarily punish

[1] Timothy Keller, *Generous Justice: How God's Grace Makes Us Just* (New York: Dutton, 2010).

[2] See Timothy Keller, "The Bible and Race," https://quarterly.gospelinlife.com/the-bible-and-race/; "The Sin of Racism," https://quarterly.gospelinlife.com/the-sin-of-racism/; "A Biblical Critique of Secular Justice and Critical Theory," https://quarterly.gospelinlife.com/a-biblical-critique-of-secular-justice-and-critical-theory/; "Justice in the Bible," https://quarterly.gospelinlife.com/justice-in-the-bible/; all in *Life in the Gospel* Quarterly Newsletter (accessed May 4, 2023).

[3] Herman Bavinck, John Bolt, and John Vriend, *Reformed Dogmatics: God and Creation*, vol. 2 (Ada, MI: Baker Academic, 2004), 223.

[4] Ibid., 223–224. Bavinck points out that "God's remunerative [restorative] justice is far more prominent in Scripture than his retributive justice," 222.

wrongdoers, and restorative justice, in which we support or restore the rights of those who have been unjustly deprived of them.

The biblical order of justice is also rooted in God's character. God created the world so that everything deserves treatment appropriate to its created nature. Above all, because human beings are made in the image of God, they have the right to be treated as such. Dutch theologian Herman Bavinck writes: "By virtue of creation … 'rights' are structured into the very existence and nature of all existing things. Such rights have above all been accorded to rational creatures."[5] In good theocentric fashion, Bavinck reminds us that because of our sinfulness, human beings have forfeited all of these "rights"—and yet God in his grace endows us with them nonetheless. Bavinck continues:

> Though one must grant that in the nature of the case creatures can have no rights before God (Romans 11:35; 1 Corinthians 4:7), nor [can they] put him under any obligation … yet it is God himself who gives his creatures "rights" … [for] when those rights have been forfeited by human sin, God makes a "covenant of nature" with Noah and a "covenant of grace" with Abraham, acts by which he again, out of sheer grace, grants to his creatures an array of rights and binds himself by an oath to maintain these rights.[6]

Bavinck is pointing to Genesis 9, where after the Flood God makes a covenant with "every living creature" (verse 12) not to destroy the earth and its people; as well as pointing to Genesis 12 and the covenant with Abraham. Even though God doesn't owe us anything, he creates an order of justice and rights for us that he honors. These rights are based on both creation—the way he made us—and grace, because he bestows them out of love and mercy, not obligation.

God "upholds the cause of the oppressed and gives food to the hungry" (Psalm 146:7). "He raises the poor from the dust and lifts the needy from the ash heap; he seats them with princes" (Psalm 113:7). He is "a father to the fatherless, a defender of widows" (Psalm 68:5). As the Judge of all the earth, the Lord will finally give everyone the retribution that justice dictates (Acts 17:30–31). But he will also restore and renew all things so there is no more evil, injustice, suffering, or death (Matthew 19:28; Revelation 21:3–5). Bavinck concludes:

> God is the supreme Lawgiver, and … the entire order of justice undergirding every domain of life is rooted in him. All laws and rights, whatever they may be, have their ultimate ground, not in a social contract, nor in self-existent natural law or in history, but in the will of God, viewed not as "absolute dominion" but as a will of goodness and grace. God's grace is the fountainhead of all laws and rights.[7]

[5] Ibid., 227.

[6] Ibid.

[7] Ibid., 227–228.

Here Bavinck shows how biblical justice is radically different from all other secular political theories. Rights and justice are not ultimately created by social contract nor based on moral laws discerned by human reason alone (as the views that have grown out of the Enlightenment insist), nor are they rooted in historical and material conditions (as the views that have grown out of Marxism or postmodernism). Justice and rights have their ultimate grounding in the character of God, in his righteousness and holiness, and in his goodness and grace.

A final theological note: this paper should be read in close connection with the DNA paper "Kingdom." We need a robust understanding of God's redemptive plan as not just individual but cosmic—namely that it will not only save souls but also create a restored material world. This is important for churches pursuing justice to understand. God's grace will restore both spiritual souls and nature itself.

THE FACETS OF JUSTICE

Biblical justice is characterized by four facets: radical generosity, social equality, life-changing advocacy, and asymmetrical responsibility.

RADICAL GENEROSITY

The first facet of biblical justice is radical generosity. While secular individualism says that our money belongs to us only, and Marxism says our money belongs to the government, the Bible says that all of our money belongs to God who entrusts us to use it according to his values (1 Chronicles 29:3–5; 1 Corinthians 4:7). In this way, our wealth belongs to us and yet does not belong to us. This means that the Bible does recognize the validity of private property (unlike Marxism) but does not see our individual property rights as absolute.

One biblical example for this stance on wealth is the fact that stealing someone's belongings is a violation of one of the Ten Commandments, and yet Israelite society generously forgave its people's debts every seven years (the Sabbath year and the Jubilee Year as seen in Deuteronomy 15:7–10 and Leviticus 25:8–55). Another example is the law of gleaning. When it came time to harvest crops, landowners were instructed not to harvest out to the very edges of their field to maximize their profits. Rather, they were told to leave the produce at the edge of the field intact so that hired workers and the poor could come "glean" it and obtain food through their own labor (Leviticus 19:9–10, 23:22).

Deuteronomy 24:19 says the gleanings should be left "for the foreigner, the fatherless, and the widow." In this verse, the Hebrew term rendered as "for" means ownership. God says that some of the profit from our business does not belong to us but to those with less. And just when some readers (particularly those in the U.S.) may think this sounds like Marxism, God's instructions in Deuteronomy 23:24–25 protect the farmer from those who might try to take advantage and glean

excessively. The Mosaic law does not demand the equalizing of wealth or the total elimination of social class. This giving was neither optional charity nor governmental redistribution.

Biblical scholar Craig Blomberg says that the view of wealth behind these laws does not fit into any contemporary or ancient economic models. The Bible, he says, "suggests a sharp critique of 1) statism that disregards the precious treasure of personal rootage, and 2) the untrammeled individualism which secures individuals at the expense of community."[8] Rather, out of love of God and love of neighbor, "The righteous (*saddiq*) are willing to disadvantage themselves to advantage the community; the wicked are willing to disadvantage the community to advantage themselves."[9]

As a result, we can say that to be radically generous is not only a matter of mercy but of justice. Ezekiel 18:5 "opens with a general statement that the [righteous person] practices justice, followed by a list of eleven concrete ways in which humans exercise these qualities."[10] To fail to do any item in the list—such as giving food to the hungry or giving clothing to the naked—is to be unjust. To be ungenerous is to be unjust. Job 29, Job 31, Isaiah 1, and Isaiah 58 make the same point.

SOCIAL EQUALITY

The second facet of biblical justice is the requirement that every person be treated according to the same standards and with the same respect, regardless of their class, race, ethnicity, nationality, gender, or any other social category.

Scripture advocates social equality in verses such as Leviticus 19:15, which says, "Do not pervert justice; do not show partiality to the poor or favoritism to the great, but judge your neighbor fairly." Deuteronomy 16:19 similarly says, "Do not pervert justice or show partiality. Do not accept a bribe, for a bribe blinds the eyes of the wise and twists the words of the innocent." This sort of attitude was revolutionary in world history. Outside of the Israelites, other cultures and societies knew nothing of it. The Greeks and Romans certainly weren't familiar with the idea that every human had equal dignity and worth, evidenced at least by Aristotle's famous intimation that some races and nationalities deserved to be slaves. Historian Tom Holland writes that ancient cultures, apart from Israel, completely lacked "any sense that the poor or the weak might have the slightest intrinsic value."[11]

What the Greeks, Romans, and other ancient cultures lacked was the book of Genesis, which teaches that all human beings are "equally … created in the image of God" (Genesis 1:27).[12] This is a fundamental principle of Scripture. Proverbs 14:31 reads, "Whoever oppresses the poor shows

[8] Craig Blomberg, *Neither Poverty nor Riches: A Biblical Theology of Possessions* (Nottingham, UK: Apollos, 1999), 46.

[9] Bruce K. Waltke, *The Book of Proverbs: Chapters 1–15* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2004), 97.

[10] Daniel Isaac Block, *The Book of Ezekiel, Chapters 1–24* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1997), 571.

[11] Tom Holland, *Dominion: How the Christian Revolution Remade the World* (New York: Basic Books, 2019), 16.

[12] Ibid., 443.

contempt for their Maker, but whoever is kind to the needy honors God," and a few chapters later, Proverbs 22:2 says that "Rich and poor have this in common: The LORD is the Maker of them all."

Jesus shocked the social sensibilities of the day by receiving and treating all classes of people with equal love and respect. The Jews saw the Samaritans as their racial inferiors, and yet twice Jesus places them both on the same spiritual level (Luke 9:54–55, 17:16). A riot started when Jesus declared that God loves Gentiles such as the widow of Zarephath and Naaman the Syrian (Luke 4:25–27) as much as he loves the Jews. Jesus reached out to lepers who were social outcasts, touching them and defying the contemporary social prohibitions (Luke 5:12–16, 17:11–19).

He exhorted his disciples to not only be generous to the poor (Luke 11:41, 12:33, 19:8) but to also welcome them into their homes and families (Luke 14:13). In that time, hospitality was an act of friendship and partnership—and it was shocking to treat the poor as equals in such a way. And through the parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25–37), Jesus defined loving our neighbors as giving practical, financial, and medical aid to those around us *even* if they are of a different religion and race. Throughout both the Old and New Testament, we repeatedly see that God's sense of justice bestows equal dignity and worth upon people of all races, religions, and social classes.

LIFE-CHANGING ADVOCACY

The third facet of biblical justice is advocacy for the poor. Several translations of Psalm 41:1 begin with, "Blessed is he who considers the poor." The word translated as "considers" means believers are to pay close attention to the weak and the poor, seeking to understand the causes of their condition and spending significant time and energy to change their life situation. Proverbs 29:7 states plainly, "The righteous care about justice for the poor, but the wicked have no such concern."

The call to advocacy assumes that the poor and the immigrant have equal rights. Deuteronomy 24:17 reads, "Do not deprive the foreigner or the fatherless of justice, or take the cloak of the widow as a pledge." The Hebrew word translated as "justice," *mispat*, refers to a person's rights in this instance. We are therefore instructed to ensure that God-given rights are not taken away from the alien, the orphan, and the widow.

The call to advocacy also assumes that our fallen world has a highly uneven distribution of opportunity and resources. Consider Proverbs 14:20: "The poor are shunned even by their neighbors, but the rich have many friends" (see also Proverbs 19:4). To be born into a privileged family is to automatically have "friends"—connections to people with power and social capital that pave the way in life. But the poor do not have such capital. Children in poor neighborhoods usually grow up with inferior schooling and in an environment that is detrimental to learning. Today, conservatives may argue that this is the parents' fault, while progressives point to a failure of social policy. But no one believes that it is the *children's* fault. They are born without "friends" who can open doors for them.

Finally, the call to advocacy assumes the reality of oppression. One of the Hebrew words for the poor is the word *ani*—a word derived from *ana*, which means to be brought to a lowly status

by force. Such force is referred to in plenty of verses, such as Proverbs 22:22: "Do not exploit the poor because they are poor and do not crush the needy in court." Proverbs 11:26 complains about sellers hoarding grain to drive up the prices to exploit the poor, and Deuteronomy 24:14–15 speaks of taking advantage (literally robbing) short-term laborers by failing to pay them daily. Jeremiah 22:3 says, "Rescue from the hand of the oppressor the one who has been robbed. Do no wrong or violence to the foreigner, the fatherless or the widow, and do not shed innocent blood in this place." Here, Jeremiah singles out groups of people who cannot protect themselves from mistreatment the way others can.

So, how do we advocate for those who need it? There are at least three ways to do this, according to the Bible: directing relief to the poor (Luke 10:30–35), empowering the poor by helping them become self-sufficient (Deuteronomy 15:13–14), and advocating for them legislatively by addressing social structures that disadvantage certain groups. Regarding the last point, Job tells us that he not only clothed the naked, but that he also "broke the fangs of the wicked and snatched the victims from their teeth" (Job 29:17). This action can take a number of forms. For example, the church may forbid its members from participating in unjust social structures that undermine the poor, such as when Paul forbade Christians from taking part in "manstealing," or kidnapping individuals to sell them into the slave trade, as was common in Roman society (1 Timothy 1:8–11). In Luke 14:1–24, Jesus commands his followers to completely abandon the patronage system, which was a major source of social inequality. And there are even instances of individuals speaking against leaders who are doing wrong, as Daniel does in Daniel 4:27 when he calls a pagan king to renounce his sins "by being kind to the oppressed." This final form of advocacy—sometimes called being a "prophetic witness"—was used well by the African American church after the Civil War, culminating in the Civil Rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s.

ASYMMETRICAL RESPONSIBILITY

Here we come to perhaps the most controversial question on this topic. One of the most basic definitions of justice is "giving people what they are due." To live justly is to take responsibility. But are we responsible only for our own individual sins, or are we also complicit in unjust social structures and partially responsible for the sins of others? The Bible's answer, as we might expect, is not simplistic—it holds examples of both corporate and individual responsibility.

Corporate responsibility. First, it is important to see that there are biblical examples of corporate responsibility.[13] They include instances such as:

- Joshua 7, in which Achan's family is executed for his sin and all of Israel is held responsible by their defeat at Ai as punishment for a sin they did not even know about at the time.

[13] Nearly every one of these is contested by interpreters, so some might not be examples of corporate responsibility, but the overall number and force of the examples is compelling enough to believe corporate responsibility does exist in some fashion.

- Numbers 16, in which the families of Korah, Dathan, and Abiram die alongside them as punishment for the three men's sins.
- 2 Samuel 21, in which God gives Israel three years of famine and refuses to grant prayers made on behalf of the land. When David inquires as to why, God tells him that he holds Israel corporately responsible for what King Saul did to the Gibeonites even though Saul is already dead and gone.
- Ezra 9 and Daniel 9, in which Ezra and Daniel confess sins of their people that they were not personally guilty of themselves.
- 1 Samuel 15:2, in which the Amalekites are punished for sins performed by their ancestors. In Deuteronomy 23:3–8, the Ammonites and Moabites suffer a similar fate for the same reason. In Amos 1–2, God holds pagan nations accountable for the sins of their past, including committing war atrocities and enslaving whole people groups.
- Acts 2, in which Peter holds responsible those who were in Jerusalem at the time of Jesus' death, even though all of these people did not actually hand him over to die. When Paul addresses the Jews in Pisidian Antioch in Acts 13, he says that it was those who lived in Jerusalem and their rulers who crucified Jesus. (He does not blame all Jews everywhere for Christ's death.)

These are all examples of God punishing groups, families, and nations because of the sin of select members. This confuses many Western cultures that are infected with what John Murray calls "the fallacy of individualism and independentism."[14]

In light of the importance of individual responsibility (which we will explore later), why does corporate responsibility exist at all? The answer is that we are not *only* individuals. We also exist within bodies, or corporate entities. Corporate responsibility depends on the kinds of bonds and unions that human beings have in a community.

One of these types of bonds is *familial*. We are more the product of our families than we choose to admit. When parents see their character flaws reproduced in their children, some responsibility for their children's sins is rightfully felt. When individuals show themselves to be in a pattern of sin, it is sometimes because their families have allowed them to become the kind of person who engages in the behavior. Families often bear some responsibility through sins of omission or commission for the wrongdoings of individual members.

[14] John Murray, "Corporate Responsibility" in *Collected Writings, Volume I* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1976). John Murray is an interesting case. He was a founding faculty member of Westminster Seminary in Philadelphia—a very conservative, Calvinistic school. Yet he was thoroughly convinced of corporate responsibility, that organizations and institutions can be guilty of evil in a higher degree than any one individual within it, and that individuals within it therefore participate in the guilt. In his words, the Bible teaches that "there are corporate entities which, as such, have responsibilities distinguishable from the strictly individual and personal responsibilities which belong to the persons comprised in these corporations." On the other hand, "the corporate entity does not exist apart from the individuals composing or comprised in that entity ... the corporate credit or guilt cannot be conceived of as existing apart from the individuals who compose the entity." He concludes, "In any case the corporate responsibility must devolve upon the individuals and become individualized in a way distinguishable from strictly individual responsibility, but not in a way that relieves the individual of responsibility," 273. Murray does not (in this chapter) apply the concept of corporate responsibility to unfair social systems but to church denominations.

Another type of corporate bond is *political and civil*. In a political community, the people are somewhat responsible for the sins of the leaders and vice versa. For example, Israel asks for a king in 1 Samuel 8–10, and even though they do not elect Saul, Saul falls into evil, and the people bear some responsibility for his sin. Why? Because they did not resist his actions. Likewise, leaders understand that they bear some responsibility for the sins that their people perform while they are in power.

A third type of bond is *communal*. In Acts 13:27, Paul holds those in Jerusalem responsible for Jesus' death but not the Jews as an entire race. The implication is that the people present at the time could have come together to stop the crucifixion in some way. While they were not formally co-citizens of a political body, they had communal relationships and power that could have been exercised. If we are in close relationships with people and do nothing about their sin, we also bear some responsibility for it (see Ezekiel 33 and Galatians 6:1–2).

Finally, we are also bound together in *institutional* ways. Institutionalized ways of living range from how we check out at a grocery store to how we gain admittance to colleges. Individuals may only perform actions within such social systems instead of creating the systems themselves, but by doing so they support the whole system. If the system privileges the powerful and disadvantages the weak, individuals within the institution are responsible for the unjust effects even if they cannot see them (or do not want to see them).

What does the existence of corporate responsibility mean for Christians who want to minister to those in need? It means that individuals aren't the only ones who must be changed—legal, social, and political systems must also be addressed. In times of revival, Christians have historically sought changes in social structures in the interest of justice and mercy. The Great Awakening in eighteenth-century England bore fruit by bringing about many social reforms. Evangelical William Wilberforce played a substantial role in abolishing the slave trade and slavery itself. Anthony A. Cooper, the Earl of Shaftesbury, led the battle to establish child labor laws that protected children from being exploited by industries. John Howard spent a large amount of his own wealth and traveled extensively to reform prison conditions. Sir Thomas Bernard was an advocate of better educational institutions for the poor and better housing for industrial workers.[15]

Throughout our lives, it is likely we will notice corrupt systems in which those in power oppress the weak and the marginalized. This reality crosses political divides: sometimes the perpetrators are people that conservatives dislike (labor unions, government officials), and sometimes they are people that liberals dislike (landlords, corporations). In all cases, injustice and systemic evil have to be addressed.

Individual responsibility. It is undeniable that individual responsibility exists in the Bible; indeed, there are too many examples to list here. Let's at least consider two important verses regarding the matter. Ezekiel 18:20 reads, "The one who sins is the one who will die. The child will not share the guilt of the parent, nor will the parent share the guilt of the child. The righteousness

[15] See John Roach, *Social Reform in England 1780–1880* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1978), 50–53.

of the righteous will be credited to them, and the wickedness of the wicked will be charged against them." Deuteronomy 24:16 similarly states, "Parents are not to be put to death for their children, nor children put to death for their parents; each will die for their own sin."

When taking these verses into account, as well as the fact that the Bible has examples of both corporate and individual sins, how do these two types of responsibility relate to each other? The answer is that there is an *asymmetrical relationship* between them, with the individual responsibility being the stronger. For example, leaders should take responsibility for wrongs done by those under their authority even when they themselves did not do them. And yet, the individuals who actually committed those wrongs always bear the greater responsibility. The reality of corporate sin does not erase or overshadow individual moral responsibility, and individual responsibility does not disprove the reality of corporate evil and responsibility. There is corporate responsibility, but in the end, we are held responsible for the sins we personally commit.

Secular worldviews tend to be reductionistic and look for a single cause that explains all of life's problems. For example, many of today's Western progressives stress corporate responsibility so much that individual responsibility is virtually ignored. Many Western conservatives deny the notion of corporate responsibility in most, if not all, instances. In general, the political left believes unequal outcomes are always due to injustice, while the right believes they are always due to personal irresponsibility. But to take either position is to adopt a secular view of justice rather than a biblical one. Poverty can be due to individual failure and wrongdoing (Proverbs 6:9–11, 23:21), or to social injustice and social structures (Proverbs 13:23, 18:23; Exodus 22:21–27), or to unpreventable external factors such as floods, disabling injuries, and illnesses. Poverty can have individual, cultural, or corporate causes—or a complex combination of them all. It is because of this complexity that the rendering of justice—both the distribution of rights and punishments—requires a *great* degree of wisdom, deliberation, and prudence.

ALTERNATE THEORIES OF JUSTICE

Below are a few alternate theories of justice that have been proposed throughout history. Each of them has at least some influence on the way Western culture thinks about the notions of fairness, equality, and oppression.

Individualism. The individualism of British philosophers John Locke and David Hume states that our circumstances in life are due to individual choices. It admits that we may each be faced with a variety of social circumstances in which some are more favorable and some are worse, but it asserts that the final outcome of those circumstances is determined by how we respond to them. For example, if we had a difficult childhood as a result of bad parenting, we don't *have* to let it warp us—we are free individuals with a responsibility to overcome that obstacle. By this logic, if someone is poor, it will *always* ultimately be their fault. We are always products of our choices. Thus, if someone is experiencing a hard life, the solution individualism offers is greater freedom and personal responsibility—free enterprise, freedom of speech, freedom of assembly, democratic

voting—by which a person can improve their quality of life through their own initiative and individual agency.

Structuralism. The structuralism of Karl Marx and Antonio Gramsci states that our circumstances in life are due to social systems. It admits that we may make foolish choices from time to time, but it asserts that social forces determine the outcomes of our lives—and that these forces can't be overcome by individual agency. Not only that, but social forces blind us to our real situation so that we don't even feel excluded or oppressed. Social forces make existing social hierarchies seem normal so that individuals can't resist them. By this logic, if someone is poor or even a criminal, it is *never* their fault. If one group of people falls behind the others, it *must* be due to systemic injustice rather than the behavior of the group. We are the products of society, and those in power stay there through sleight of hand. Structuralism speaks of freedom—freedom of choice, free speech, free enterprise, and freedom of association (religious groups, civic groups, clubs, and neighborhood associations)—but all of these things only advantage people at the top. The only solution is revolution and governmental control of speech, economy, and all associative groups.

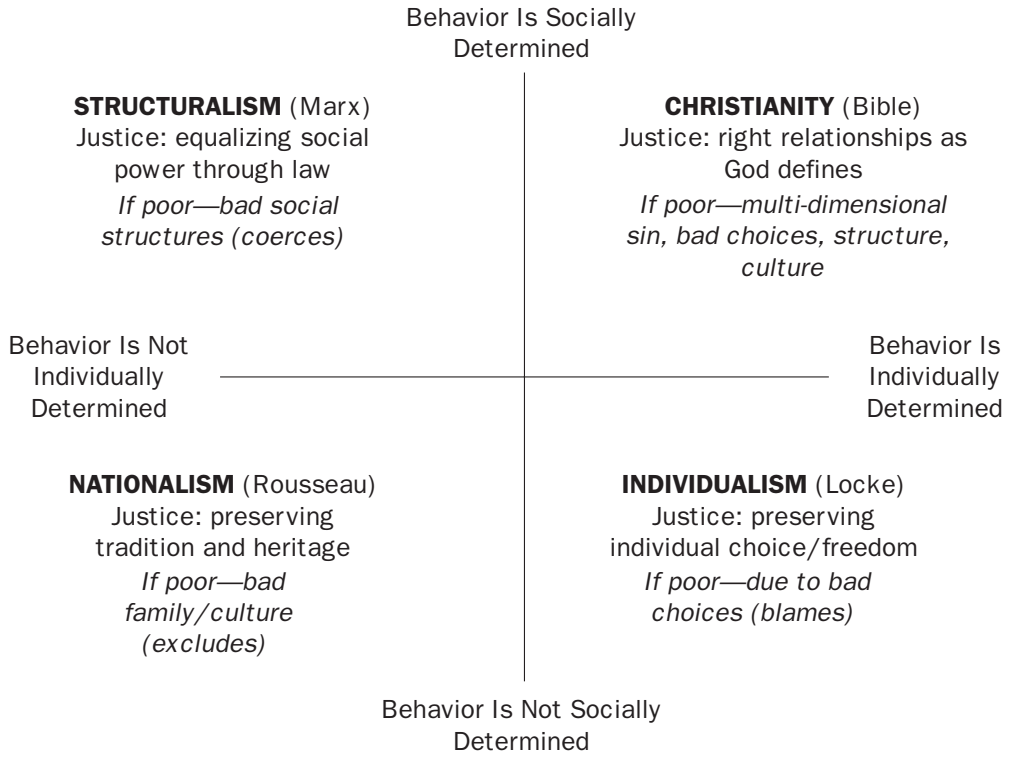
Nationalism. The nationalism of Jean-Jacques Rousseau is deeply opposed to Marxism, but it also opposes individualism by teaching that it leads to social chaos. Nationalism says that our circumstances in life are due primarily to culture—how our society views family and nation, what traditions it keeps, and what its moral values are. It sees some cultures (and therefore races) as inferior and others as superior. If we extend the previous example to this ideology, if someone is poor, it is primarily their family or their culture's fault. Nationalism favors a traditional identity assigned by a person's tribe and family rather than the modern, individualistic self or Marxist identity politics in which our class or racial identity is primary, and our validity and virtue are determined by how marginalized we are.

All these approaches share an essentially secular view of human nature and fail to acknowledge a radical, universal sinfulness. Human nature is portrayed as naturally good, a blank slate, or malleable; but it is not portrayed as fallen due to sin. Individualism assumes we don't need shared moral values to govern; we just need self-interest. Marxism sees all crime and sinful behavior as consequences of social systems. Both of these views have naïve understandings of human sinfulness. While nationalism is more pessimistic about *other* humans and adheres to traditional moral teachings, nationalists won't admit the sinfulness, evil, and fallenness in their own selves or their own national history.

Each approach also shares an overconfidence in human reason. All views imply that humanity does not require divine revelation to know how it should live. Instead, human reason can discover moral values on its own. Again, nationalism is less confident of this, and yet extreme forms of it—such as Nazism—can be predominantly based on human understandings of science and technology rather than God's instruction.

Finally, these ideologies share a reductionistic and mechanistic understanding of human outcomes. Although they don't agree on the factor itself, they each believe that one simple factor is the cause of society's problems. In contrast, the Bible says that since we are created in

the image of the Triune God—both one and three—humans are both individual agents and irreducibly social and cultural. Unlike animals, we need ways to make sense of the world and provide values and beliefs that unite us into a "conscience collective."[16] Thus, we create culture. We are the result of our choices, our family, our culture, *and* our social systems. And we are also affected by evil in several dimensions: individual sin of the heart, corporate evil and social systems that disadvantage groups, fallen cultures that perpetrate sinful behavior, and demonic powers.



COMPARING BIBLICAL JUSTICE TO THE ALTERNATIVES

Only biblical justice addresses all of the concerns about justice found across the fragmented alternate views. Each secular theory of justice addresses one or some of the four facets of biblical justice mentioned above (radical generosity, social equality, life-changing advocacy, and asymmetrical responsibility), but none addresses them all.

Biblical justice contradicts each of the alternate views by neither entirely dismissing them nor compromising them. In comparison, the biblical approach is significantly more coherent in that it is based on God's character—a moral absolute—rather than the changing winds of human culture like other theories. It is more penetrating in its analysis of the human condition because it sees injustice stemming from a more complex set of causes—social, individual, environmental,

[16] Émile Durkheim, *The Division of Labor in Society* (Digireads.com Publishing, 2013).

and spiritual—than any other theory addresses. Biblical justice provides a unique understanding of wealth and ownership that does not fit into modern categories of capitalism or Marxism.

Biblical justice also has built-in safeguards against domination. To have a coherent theory of justice, there must be an affirmation of moral absolutes that are universal and true for all cultures. Without appealing to some kind of non-socially constructed truth and morality, there is no way to further justice. The French postmodernists were right that, in the hands of human beings, claims about truth can easily lead to totalitarian attitudes in those who readily use them. But Christianity offers claims about truth that can subvert domination. How?

Christianity does not claim to explain all of reality. There is an enormous amount of mystery, or things we are simply not told (Deuteronomy 29:29). We are not given a "theory of everything" that can explain things in terms of evolutionary biology or social forces. Human beings and the reality around us are fundamentally complex and mysterious—so much so that we will never fully understand them. Christianity offers an illuminating explanation for the world's problems, but it does not claim that we can fix most of them by following its agenda. Other narratives tend to view those who uphold it as saviors who can put things right. Christians believe that we can fight for a degree of justice, but that God will eventually be the one to put all things right. Until then, we can never expect to fully fix the world, and so Christianity does not have the same utopian aspirations that other narratives do.

Only biblical justice offers a radically subversive understanding of power. It gives us a profound account of power and its corruption, but rather than merely pointing out problems, it also gives us a model for changing how power is used in the world. The Bible repeatedly features God identifying with the wretched, powerless, and marginalized. The central story of the Old Testament is the liberation of slaves from captivity. Those who deliver God's people from oppression are usually racial and social outsiders, seen as weak and rejected by the elites of the world. When God came to earth in Jesus Christ, he came as a poor man to a family at the bottom of the social order. He experienced torture and death at the hands of religious and government elites using their power unjustly to oppress. In Jesus, we see God laying aside his privilege and power—his "glory"—in order to identify with the weak and helpless (Philippians 2:5–8). And yet, through the endurance of violence and human injustice, he paid the rightful penalty of humanity's sin to divine justice (Isaiah 53:5). Then, he was raised to even greater honor and given the authority to rule (Philippians 2:9–11). Jesus takes authority only after losing it in service to the weak and helpless.

So, the Bible does not presume an end to the "binary" of power, of the ruler and the ruled. Rule and authority are not intrinsically wrong; indeed, they are necessary in any society. Neither does Christianity simply reverse the binary by merely filling the top ranks of authority with new parties who will use power just as oppressively as the last. Because Christianity is rooted in the death and resurrection of Jesus, it *subverts* the binary of the ruler and the ruled. When Jesus saves us by using his power only for service, he changes our attitude toward power and the way we use it.[17]

[17] For the basic idea in this final section on Christianity and power, I am indebted to Christopher Watkin. See his *Michel Foucault* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2018).

There is nothing in the world like biblical justice! Christians must not sell their birthright for a mess of pottage by exchanging God's justice for an inferior version concocted by the world. We must take up our birthright and pursue justice for those who need it, we must love by exemplifying mercy to others, and we must walk humbly with our God (Micah 6:8).

WORKING FOR JUSTICE

This may sound all well and good, but how are Christians practically supposed to work toward ensuring the rights and just treatment of those around us? Here are a few principles to keep in mind as we endeavor to undertake this task.

Start with the church. No one will listen to Christians who call society to just social relationships if our relationships in the church are as flawed and unjust as those in society. Within the church, wealth is to be shared generously between the rich and the poor (2 Corinthians 8:13–15; Leviticus 25), and materialism should be known as a grievous sin (James 5:1–6; 1 Timothy 6:17–19). Inside the church, different races should not merely get along but become a new humanity in which the old divisions no longer prevail (Ephesians 2:15). The church is a "holy nation," a new society (1 Peter 2:9) in which family life, business practices, race relations, and interpersonal relationships are changed. We are a foretaste of the future kingdom of God, a place for the world to get a partial glimpse of what humanity will look like under Jesus' kingship and justice.

Work in the world. In general, the gathered church's job is to make disciples rather than to directly seek to change society politically. But it must form disciples in such a way that they go out in the world and work and live in ways that change society for the better. I believe this is a vital distinction to make (with the important condition that the church should play a more direct role during times of severe social and cultural crisis or extreme government oppression).

At the practical level, church leaders usually do not have the expertise necessary to make public statements on political issues or to run affordable housing complexes, community development corporations, schools, and the like. As mentioned in the DNA paper "Public Theology," I have seen churches trying to institutionally seek justice that end up letting it eclipse the true tasks of the church—evangelizing and creating disciples. Churches that constantly declare partisan political opinions can communicate to people that they aren't welcome if they don't agree with the congregation's stances—or even just the pastor's. As a general guideline, it is best for local church leaders to encourage their laypeople to form and lead organizations in the community that work for justice rather than trying to manage the organizations themselves.

Though I believe that the institutional church should avoid or be sparing in its political declarations and leave the direct work of social reform to Christians gathered into various organizations, I am fully aware that this distinction (while usually helpful and important) applies differently depending on a society's state. In times of social crises, such as in Nazi Germany, the

church must necessarily take political stands. As I have said before, it will always be debatable as to what constitutes a "social crisis" and when the line has been crossed, so the church must employ great wisdom when addressing cultural issues head-on.

In summation, while the institutional church's first responsibility is to evangelize and disciple through the Word of God, that discipling must motivate and equip Christians to seek justice for their community, or such discipleship is not aligned with the Word of God.

Use humility and patience. Christians who are grounded in the already-but-not-yet nature of God's kingdom have a balance of both endurance and hope. We know God will one day bring about total justice, so we can work with hopeful confidence that things will be better in the future. But we also know that we are not the saviors who will be able to accomplish this. Biblical justice humbles us because when we look at the cross, we realize that we are perpetrators of injustice ourselves, just as the ones who killed Jesus were. And yet, Jesus is patient with us and forgives us. Christians seeking justice must employ the same attitude, opting not to be abrasive or caustic and listening to the cries of the oppressed with patience—even when their anger is directed toward us.

Use informed listening. Despite the antithetical nature of human worldviews, we can and must learn from non-believers. The doctrine of sin means Christians are not as wise as our God-given worldview should make us; and the doctrine of common grace means non-believers are not as unwise as their wrong worldview should make them.

Give clear witness. When working for justice in the world, Christians must not go incognito and hide their faith. One of the reasons for being "salt and light" is so that others will see our good deeds and "glorify [our] Father in heaven" (Matthew 5:14–16; 1 Peter 2:12). This cannot happen if people don't know about our faith. While we seek to make our cities better for our neighbors whether they believe in God or not, we must also let people know of our motivation so we may have an opportunity to share our faith.

Be political but not partisan. As discussed in the DNA paper "Public Theology," while individual Christians may be involved in politics, the gospel and the church should not be identified with one political order, policy, or political figure. This is both divisive within the church and discrediting in the world outside of it. Paul insists that Christians must not let legal or political differences supersede their oneness in Christ (1 Corinthians 6:6–7).[18] On the other hand, it is no real option to insist that Christians be apolitical. To say that Christians should do nothing politically is to vote for the status quo of a society, and our doctrine of sin means that no society is without its injustices.

Don't neglect the local. This cannot serve as an absolute rule, and its effectiveness may vary depending on the culture, but I suggest Christians work on matters of justice locally more than they do nationally. It is also usually better to focus on particular issues of injustice rather than

[18] Though they do not address a situation identical to ours, the words of Paul in 1 Corinthians 6 are relevant here. In the passage, Paul condemns Christians going to civil court against each other. It discredits the faith, he says, because Christians are allowing legal and political differences a greater role in their identities than their common union with Christ. Paul says in verses 6 and 7, "But instead, one brother takes another to court—and this in front of unbelievers! The very fact that you have lawsuits among you means you have been completely defeated already. Why not rather be wronged? Why not rather be cheated?"

diving headfirst into "national conversations" on an issue. There are many specific issues that can be worked on locally to improve the lot of people in a community and show Christ's love to both them and the world. (See more on this below.)

Listen to Christian leaders in disadvantaged communities. It is wrong for churches from middle and upper classes to help the disadvantaged without listening to and non-paternalistically partnering with Christian leaders from those communities.

Look beyond relief to development and reform. As noted above, poverty and injustice are not always due to the individual's actions—they can be caused by social structures that disadvantage and oppress. The Bible condemns some of these that were present in ancient times, such as the patronage system in Luke 14:1–24, and manstealing and slavery in 1 Timothy 1:8–11. But what are the structures in our society that Christians should challenge today? Christians should work against things such as corruption in government, unfair criminal justice systems, and unethical dealings in educational systems, the housing market, banks, and other entities.

NEIGHBORHOOD MINISTRY

From continent to continent, nation to nation, and city to city, how a congregation seeks the welfare of its neighborhood will look different depending on the prevailing political and social orders. But no matter who or where we are, the parable of the Good Samaritan stares every Christian church in the face. By telling the parable, Jesus answered the question of who the neighbors we must love actually are. The story depicts a man giving practical, substantial, and material help to someone of a different race and religion at great cost and risk to himself. Our neighbor is not someone who simply aligns with us spiritually, politically, or culturally. They are *anyone* in need who is *nigh* us (an older word for "near," from which the word "neighbor" is taken). As Jesus' story reminds us, we have a duty to care for those around us and work for the betterment of their lives, no matter who they are. How can we do this practically?

Choose a parish. By "parish," I mean an area around a church's location that thinks of itself as something of a unit or neighborhood. The goal is to become a known member of the area and known to care about its flourishing. Many insist that such a parish needs to be walkable—small enough that we can walk from the church meeting place to any part of it. This is a good standard in many urban areas, but it is not always practical in suburban neighborhoods in which most people use cars.

Orient church members to the parish. To do this means our church members who live in and near the parish must narrow their footprint, so to speak. As much as possible, they should seek to patronize shops, organizations, community centers, restaurants, schools, and professionals such as doctors within the parish. Doing so establishes a greater knowledge of the parish's people and a greater rapport with them.

Find Christians in the parish who attend other churches. We should meet other Christians who are not members of our church. Conversations with these individuals help us learn about the

neighborhood, and they may even prove potential partners for future work in the area. However, we must be careful not to weaken their ties to their home church and make it clear we are not seeking to do that.

Get to know the parish. Know the area's history (including past and present government regulations such as zoning laws) and the people groups living within it. Know its business-owners, schools, nonprofits, community centers, and other non-businesses. Learn the concerns of longtime residents, which will be different from those of recently arrived residents. Identify the informal eldership of the neighborhood. Who are the (usually long-term) residents that function as gatekeepers? Identify formal leaders, as well—generally those in local government.

We should then establish a vision for our parish as we talk to more residents and hear how they define the neighborhoods. How do we form this vision? We do this by formally researching, by meeting neighbors for no reason or agenda other than to know them and learn from them, and by walking the neighborhood with people who have lived there longer than us. As we do so, it's important to ask people two main questions. What do they like the most about the neighborhood? What do they wish was different?

Don't jump to plans, programs, or outreach ministries quickly. Evangelical churches tend to pick up the latest effective program they have read about and impose it as a best practice on their parish. This can be a way to push our agenda to grow our church, but it may not be the best thing for the community. Treat every community as unique, taking time to learn its character and listen to its people.

In general, look at these four areas in your parish:

- **Civic life:** This involves governance and local leadership as well as informal leadership, such as businesses, organizations, and community groups. Observe how decisions are made.
- **Environment:** This involves the quality of the area's environment. Look at the level of beauty and effectiveness in its architecture, roads, and parks. Look also at its natural environment to see if there are any problems (such as pollution) present in the soil, water, or air.
- **Economy:** This involves the way goods and services are exchanged. How is money earned and spent, invested and accrued, borrowed and lent here? Does the money made by businesses in the community stay in the community? Are the proprietors residents themselves?
- **Educational life:** This involves how children are educated and nurtured in the area. Take note of which cultural institutions are present (such as libraries and music venues) and which events and programs take place to instruct, deepen, and enrich members of the community.

Begin to connect the church to those four areas. Having some members start a small business or finding a way for them to do their jobs in their parish usually connects all four of these

areas—connecting the economy to the environment, civic life, and education—and helps the community in multiple ways. Working outside the parish helps when church members return and spend money there, but less than if members work in the parish.

The way our church uses its space also matters to the parish's people. Is our space a gathering space for others? Is our space a "third space" (somewhere that isn't the home or the workplace) for people in the community to congregate? Can it be used for education, or to further civic and economic life?

One of the most ambitious and complex actions to take is community organizing—convening neighbors and discussing what they could accomplish together. To read examples of this in Western societies, see Jeffrey Stout's *Blessed are the Organized: Grassroots Democracy in America*[19] and Luke Bretherton's *Resurrecting Democracy: Faith, Citizenship, and the Politics of a Common Life*.[20]

In light of what has been said above, we can distill the process of developing a neighborhood ministry into four basic steps.

1. Identify the parish and get congregants more involved in its life.
2. Network with Christians from other churches who live in the neighborhood. Strengthen relationships with them and begin studying the parish together.
3. Network with non-Christians who live in the neighborhood. This might include volunteering and serving in the area, as well as generally participating in its goings-on and being involved in its day-to-day life.
4. Begin meeting with neighborhood leaders and organizations to explore ways the church can contribute to the quality of common life in the neighborhood.

[19] Jeffrey Stout, *Blessed Are the Organized: Grassroots Democracy in America* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010).

[20] Luke Bretherton, *Resurrecting Democracy: Faith, Citizenship, and the Politics of a Common Life* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015).

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PART FIFTEEN

Faith and Work

One of the biggest draws of living in a city is exploring its opportunities for discovering our purpose and advancing our careers. Every year, countless people move to the great cities of the world specifically to find greater fortune and new positions of employment. Professionals (or aspiring professionals) go to the city with great ambitions for their own personal fulfillment and advancement. The less privileged go to cities for survival, to find plentiful jobs that are scarce elsewhere, though often exploitative. Whatever the case, work is central to the lives of most urbanites in any part of the world.

The importance of work in a city-dweller's life brings with it both a responsibility and an opportunity for churches in the city. We cannot ignore such a large facet of our congregants' lives, especially when the city tempts so many of us to idolize work and compromise our ethics for financial gain, power, or status. Many congregants yearn for instruction on how to apply biblical principles to their jobs. Existing Christians may find themselves working in environments that are unjust and wonder what actions they should take. New converts, too, ask what implications their newfound faith has for their career.

The Bible gives us manifold resources to answer these questions and navigate our careers and workspaces. It calls privileged professionals to work not to make a name for themselves (Genesis 11:4) but for the glory of God (1 Corinthians 10:31). It shows those who work in less prestigious jobs how to have dignity in any job by working "unto the Lord" rather than just for human bosses (Ephesians 6:7). With the gospel's theology of work as a guide, we can begin to answer the question, "How does our faith shape the way we work?"

A BRIEF THEOLOGY OF WORK

Many dictionaries define work as activity involving mental or physical effort done in order to achieve a purpose or result. In the beginning, we see God working in the acts of creation—and then he rests. According to this example, anything that is not rest or leisure is work.[1] Thus, it is important not to think—as we do in our professionalized society—that work is only what we are paid to do. No one paid God to do the work that he did.

The belief that "real work" is paid work leads first to the denigration of perhaps the largest body of work—domestic acts of homemaking, which are crucial not only for physical health but human flourishing and happiness in general. Second, it leads us to assess the value of work strictly

[1] Missy Wallace and Lauren Gill, personal correspondence.

based on how much money it earns. A job with a higher salary is then implicitly or explicitly valued more than one that pays less, regardless of what the actual duties entail.

Though the world tends to evaluate work strictly based on the economic principles of supply and demand, Christians should evaluate work based on how it contributes to human thriving and flourishing. We should seek paid work to support ourselves and our families, but while we do so, we must see that the unpaid work we do to serve our family and neighborhood is dignified before God and promotes human flourishing. Our unpaid work is real work, too.

GOD'S CREATION AND OUR WORK

Work is unarguably important to God. Before the Fall, before anything was ever wrong with the world, humanity was placed in a paradise and given work to do (Genesis 2:15). Therefore, work is not a curse; it is something we were designed to do. Without work, we feel a significant sense of inner loss or emptiness. It is the main way we spend our time on the earth. It is not surprising, then, that Christians do not see the integration of faith and work as something optional—something that they may look into if they get around to it. As faith and work leader Missy Wallace says, "Faith and work is the main context where people spend their time (and experience joy and pain) and thus a [major] place of sanctification and vertical relationship with God as well as of horizontal relationships with people, community and systems."[2]

Another important implication of Genesis 1–2 is that we were created to be partners with God in *his* work. God called human beings to cultivate nature and draw out its created potentials. But we are not alone, as God plays an active role in work even today. In John 5:17, Jesus remarks that both he and his Father work, and several psalms tell us the Holy Spirit not only saves souls but also sustains, cultivates, and renews the material world (Psalm 104:30; 145, 147).

As we know, the scope of our material world is so large that it couldn't possibly require only one type of work to sustain it. The act of cultivating creation extends beyond gardening: agriculture, science, architecture, and art are all fields of cultivation, as well. This means that making clothes, practicing law, tilling fields, mending broken bodies, advancing science, nurturing children, and preaching the gospel *all* participate in the Spirit's work. The view that an artist or a banker performs "secular work" while a minister performs "spiritual work" does not align with the Bible. God himself is an artist and an investor in the material world. In Genesis 1, his hands are literally in the dust as he undertakes manual labor. All of these types of work—and many more—have dignity and can renew the world around us.

But work has suffered under the results of the Fall. In Genesis 3:15–19, God says that humanity's labor to create civilization and propagate humanity now has a curse on it. There are at least two ways this curse affects us. First, it affects us individually as our hearts create idols of work. To make too little of work is to miss its importance, but we can also make too much of it. We will not

[2] Missy Wallace, personal correspondence.

have a meaningful life without work, but we must not make our work *the* meaning of our life. To make any career—even one in ministry—our entire life's purpose is to create an idol. Because of sin's influence, we often work for our own glory rather than God's (see Genesis 11:4). This makes the vast majority of work frustrating and difficult despite the intrinsic goodness it often holds. No matter what field we are in, our work frequently falls short of what we want it to be and to accomplish. We must be careful not to put our hope in work rather than God, as well as to remember it is not all there is in life. The fact that God himself rested after work (Genesis 2:2) demonstrates this.

Second, the curse on work affects us collectively, as our culture creates corporate idols of work. Every culture that does not make God its highest good will make something else the supreme good, and this is true of subcultures, as well. The fields of business, art, and the media all have their own idols that vary from country to country. There is systemic dysfunction in broken systems that hampers work for the individual, even if their own attitude toward work is biblically sound. The adverse effects of the Fall create high unemployment, an inequitable distribution of wealth and opportunity, and a host of other difficulties. Sometimes these problems are created by earthly circumstances such as natural disasters, but unjust social structures also aggravate the effects of sin.

JESUS' REDEMPTION AND OUR WORK

Just like the ancient Greeks, modern thought tends to separate religious beliefs from public life. But the Bible does not support such a distinction between the sacred and the secular. To be followers of Christ, we cannot separate our inner faith from our life in the public sphere. Everything, including our work, our family activities, our civic involvement, and our recreation, is now to be done for God's glory (1 Corinthians 10:31). Living for the "glory of God" means that he is our ultimate importance. In every area of life, we must ask how this affects the actions we take, the decisions we make, and our motivation for what we do. If God is the most important thing to us, how should we spend our money? How should we manage or contribute to a business? How should we be present in our neighborhood?

But here's a crucial question we may find ourselves asking before any of the others: if the effects of sin have affected work, what hope do we have to actually fix it? Why should we even bother trying to live well when we know we will be met with frustration and brokenness? Before we attempt to answer, it is important to revisit Jesus' teaching about God's kingdom. Recall Jesus' words that, in him, the kingdom of God has arrived (Luke 17:20–21), and we enter it now through conversion (Matthew 18:3). Yet remember that he is just as clear that the kingdom of God has *not* come in all its fullness. He taught his disciples to ask God for the kingdom to come through prayer (Matthew 6:10). He told them that "the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world" would not be given until Judgment Day (Matthew 25:34). As the other papers have explained, the kingdom of God is already-but-not-yet-here at the same time. The kingdom of God is present wherever the Holy Spirit is present in power. Where God exerts his rule through his Word

and Spirit, the effects of sin start to be healed. We must not underestimate how present the kingdom of God is—that it is like an ongoing great banquet (Matthew 22:2) and a state of "blessedness" (Matthew 5:3, 10). But we must also not underestimate how unrealized it is and how much of it we will only experience in the future. Because the kingdom is present partially but not fully, we can expect substantial healing but not total healing in all areas of our life, including work.

Adam was given a "cultural mandate" (Genesis 1:28) to cultivate the garden (Genesis 2:15). Genesis does not spell out all that this commission entails, but when we read about the new heaven and new earth in Revelation 21–22, we see that the final City of God has been established. The City of God is the Garden of Eden returned, cultivated perfectly and developed into a beautiful Garden City, thanks to the actions of Jesus, the Second Adam. The human race began in a garden, but when salvation is complete, it will end in a wonderful city that is the result of God-glorifying work and culture-making.

This biblical narrative gives us a beautiful, compelling image to work toward and has clear implications for our work. The "already" nature of God's kingdom means that Christians can expect God's power to change our vocations, workplaces, and communities. But the "not yet" nature of God's kingdom means our plans for transforming our work and renewing the world through it will never be fully realized, and sometimes it will feel like these plans make little difference at all. Those who believe that the kingdom is *only* "not yet" will be extremely pessimistic about the possibility of change in people, churches, businesses, and society. Those who believe that the kingdom is already here in its entirety will be naïvely optimistic about the ability to make radical changes that remove all the effects of the Fall in a society.

We must remember that God introduced humanity to the concept of work while we were still in paradise. Contrary to what we may feel, work is not a punishment for sin that we must endure in order to survive. It is something we were created to do and enjoy, and the implication is that work will continue in the new heaven and new earth as it would have in the original paradise. There are hints that we will not be inactive members of God's kingdom in eternity, as commerce, art, and music continue (Isaiah 60; Revelation 19:1–9). The work we have always wanted to do but have not been able to do because of the Fall will become a reality in the renewed universe. How wonderful an idea! But until we experience this reality in full, we must resolve to point our lives' work toward it. Our jobs, our cities, and our homes will not be perfect until the kingdom fully arrives, but change remains possible. By glorifying God in all our efforts, we can better our lives and the lives of those around us, cultivate creation, and prove a witness to Christ's salvation.

ADDENDUM: FAITH, WORK, AND MINISTRY

Those in pietistic circles tend to think Christians with "secular jobs" are not connected to the work of God's kingdom—that is, that they don't work in a way that reflects Christ's Lordship, glorifies God, and serves their neighbors. Instead, these jobs are seen as ways to earn tithe money that supports the ministers and missionaries doing God's *real* work. Because vocational church ministry

is given an exalted status as the highest human calling, many young Christians in these circles are attracted to it. But as the rest of this paper will explain, this is a theological distortion of the Bible.

However, there is also a danger on the other side of the spectrum. In churches that stress the integration of faith and work, sometimes working "out in the world" is glamorized, and the ministries of evangelism and discipleship are left wanting. Indeed, evangelism and discipleship *are* fundamental, for without them there are no Christians to integrate faith and work in the first place. Churches that promote faith and work must also encourage people—especially younger congregants—to consider vocational ministry.

A BRIEF THEOLOGY OF REST

To have a healthy theology of work, we must also have a healthy theology of rest. The Bible gives us a wealth of instruction about rest and frequently mentions the importance of honoring the Sabbath by pausing our work to rest in God's presence. In Mark 2:27–28, Jesus even says he is the Lord of the Sabbath—the Lord of rest! In Matthew 11:28–30, he urges us to come to him because he "will give [us] rest" when no one else will. Resting and respecting the Sabbath are clearly important to God, and so it would be a mistake for us to ignore it.

What exactly is the nature of the Sabbath? It signifies a regular time to cease from work and enjoy its results. The purpose is not simply to rejuvenate ourselves so that we can produce more work, nor is it the pursuit of pleasure and leisure for its own sake. The purpose of Sabbath is to enjoy both God and his creation, getting physical and spiritual rest. In Deuteronomy 5:12–15, God even refers to the Sabbath in terms of freedom from slavery, signifying it as a sign of the freedom we have in the gospel. To honor the Sabbath is to recognize that, in God, we are not slaves to any material object or human expectation. The Sabbath is also a sign of the future redemption of the world that is to come, in which all of the taxing effects of sin will be erased.

One of these effects of sin is the extent to which our work can exhaust and emotionally drain us. Those in careers revered by society often find themselves overworked or facing a great deal of pressure. Those in careers disparaged by society often find themselves dealing with a sense of bitterness, boredom, or shame. Rest is essential so that our work does not wear us down, but the external rest of the body is impossible without inner rest from anxiety and strain. It takes deep rest in Christ's finished work of our salvation (Hebrews 4:1–10) to avoid becoming totally demoralized by our jobs. We will be slaves to the hardships of our work unless we rest in the knowledge that the finished work of Christ frees us.

This is why Jesus says he alone can give us rest (Matthew 11:28–30). All other yokes and burdens make us heavy-laden. Of course, following the gospel is a yoke of its own—we are committing ourselves to God and his ways. But Jesus implies that we are always going to belong to someone or something. There is no yoke-less life. Even if we think we are independently going our own way, something will be driving our life and function as our boss, so to speak. Jesus is the only one who will not crush us.

Only Jesus offers us a finished work to rest in. Recall that God was only able to rest in Genesis 2:1–3 because his work was finished. In this lifetime, we will never be able to finish and be completely satisfied in our work, and so we will never be able to truly rest in our own accomplishments and circumstances. But Jesus lived a perfect life and secured our salvation. Therefore, as Christians, we will not only admire, emulate, and obey Jesus but also find restoration and peace in Jesus' work instead of our own. As Christians, we know that it would be quite alright if we died on any given day. The work needed to save our souls has already been done—everything that actually *has* to happen within our lifetime has happened. Everything else we can accomplish in our work is icing on the cake. (Icing is quite tasty, of course, but not absolutely necessary!)

Honoring the Sabbath is how we acknowledge Jesus' work for us. For people with power and agency in their jobs, the Sabbath challenges them to not base their identity on their career and seek their own salvation in it. Anyone who does this will never be able to rest from work and will end up a slave to their own need for success or the demands of a materialistic culture. For people with less power and agency in their jobs, the Sabbath is a crucial declaration of freedom from exploitative employers and the demands—and possibly even disregard—of society. Culture often tells these people that their positions have a lowly status, but in Christ, they are elevated to the position of God's adopted children and accepted as members of his kingdom.

Both the Marxist ideology (which says that work begets power) and the Freudian ideology (which says work begets self-realization), along with the postmodern idea that we must invent our own identity, cause today's people to put enormous pressure on work to be something satisfying, profitable, and fulfilling. But the vast majority of jobs in the world are either unfulfilling or unlucrative—many times both. Only if we receive the deep rest of the gospel will we be able to remember that we are not slaves to our work and live a happy life despite its shortcomings.

INTEGRATING FAITH AND WORK

In order for Christians to live by these theologies of work and rest, the church must integrate the subjects of the Christian faith and working in the world. This integration is not only important for their own lives but is also important for evangelizing the lives of those around them. Most ministers believe Christians mature when they spend less time out in the world and more time within the church, where it is thought that discipling, sanctification, and evangelism take place. But this line of thinking restricts evangelism to one course of action: bringing non-Christians to church services and events. Relying on this method alone is ineffective, as Christians cannot be the "salt and light" of a society if they do not actually step out into it. Because there are many people who will not set foot in the church until they are reached in their homes, their neighborhood blocks, and their offices, we must not spend all of our time inside existing Christian communities.

Keeping evangelism inside of the church is also inefficient. Most people in full-time employment work around forty hours a week. If we reconceive work as a crucial place for sanctification, Christian growth, evangelism, and pursuing justice and the betterment of society, believers will

put far more time into these pursuits than the few hours a week they spend within the church walls.

We have traditionally thought of the integration of faith and work to be a type of ministry separate from the fields of evangelism and justice. There is, of course, work to be done in justice and evangelism that will happen outside of our workspaces, but in general we must rethink separating these efforts from our careers. If we as Christians bring our faith into our work in a strong, evident way, it will have an evangelistic effect on colleagues, clients, and others as they notice us working not only excellently but self-sacrificially and for justice within broken systems. Integrating faith and work often creates more just and equitable workplaces or provides other opportunities for "centering the margins"[3]—bringing in and including people who have been excluded or disempowered.

Rather than isolating faith and work as a program that we may get to someday, we must embed it into what is already happening: preaching, prayer, discipleship, and routine pastoral care. At the end of every sermon on our heart's idols, for example, we can apply the message to the field of work so that people have clear instruction on how to apply biblical wisdom to their jobs the next day. We cannot omit the integration of faith and work from the process of the gospel's renewal of our hearts. Instead, we must see it as one of the key places our hearts *are* renewed by the gospel, and one of the main ways this renewal is shown to others.

EQUIPPING WORKERS

How do we equip churchgoers to live and work in a distinctively Christian way? How can they speak out against error and wrongdoing without simply confronting culture at every turn? How can they adapt to culture to be understandable and relevant without totally assimilating to it? There are three aspects of training Christians to enrich the common good through their work.

Understanding our worldview to work distinctively. Christians need theological education in how to think about *all* of life, public and private, in a distinctly Christian way. We need to know which cultural practices stem from God's common grace and should be embraced, which practices are antithetical to the gospel and must be rejected, and which practices can be adapted and revised. We make these decisions on the basis of a Christian worldview and a Christian high theory. (For more details on this, see the DNA paper "Biblical High Theory.")

Spiritually nurturing those in different fields. Every kind of work has its own pressures and challenges. Business, art, marketing, government, law, education, and all other vocational fields have unique idols and temptations, as well as their own peculiar patterns of both worldliness and common grace. Those within each field need spiritual support for the specific challenges of their type of work. This support provides them with the accountability to live and work with Christian integrity and act as an evangelistic witness in their vocation.

[3] Thanks to ministry leader Dennae Pierre for this phrase.

Cooperating and producing culture. We should strive to be great at our professions, doing whatever we can to maximize our skillfulness and effectiveness. We do not have complete control over this because God, in his providence, has given us different gifts and talents. Some of us are simply better at certain types of work than others because God made us better. However, we should try to improve within the framework of our gifts as much as we can.

Excellence is crucial for at least three reasons. First, it is a great witness to the gospel. When people know we are Christians and *also* know us as one of the best at what we do, it automatically gives credibility to Christianity in the non-Christian's mind. Second, with regard to bringing justice and renewal into a vocational field, only those considered great practitioners will be allowed to innovate. Third, if we seek to produce some type of work that influences culture and its narratives, we are far more likely to be well-received and influential if we are seen as quality workers in our craft.

There have been many ministries focused on bringing Christianity into the marketplace over the past several generations. But most of them tend to exclusively stress one of the three practices above. Some are highly intellectual, focus on building a Christian worldview, and apply specifically to white-collar professionals. Some are more pietistic, focus on spiritually nurturing Christians in specific vocations, and give little advice on how to work in a distinctively Christian manner. A few are mainly about congregating Christians in a profession so they can open doors for each other and cooperate to create positive contributions to culture.

I believe a faith and work ministry needs to incorporate all three of these practices. In order to better understand them, let's take a closer look at each of them.

UNDERSTANDING OUR WORLDVIEW TO WORK DISTINCTIVELY

First, we'll examine the matter of developing a Christian worldview to work distinctively. It is fairly tempting for all of us—Christians or otherwise—to divide life into the categories of "secular" and "sacred." For example, a Christian singer may directly invite people to come to Christ when they sing in church on a Sunday. But during their business dealings throughout the week, it can be easy to work with altogether different motives, such as building their self-esteem and fame or simply trying to make enough money to live. It may not occur to them that there is a way to excel in their craft *and* keep their Christian beliefs as the primary motive of their art. This is what changes them from being a singer who happens to be a Christian into a distinctly Christian singer whose art and work is shaped by the gospel every day of the week. (This is not to say that all of a singer's work must be heavy-handed or overt in employing Christian symbolism, but rather that their Christian worldview may lead them to explore using their music in ways that address the goodness of creation, convey meaningfulness to people, pursue excellence in their art, and any number of other edifying practices.)

Christians so often separate their faith from their work due to the lingering effects of classical Greek dualism, which separated faith from public life. The first result of dualism is the widespread

belief that the only way to truly serve God is taking part in direct ministry—teaching, evangelizing, and discipling. For generations this has effectively removed Christians from places of cultural influence. It sees the church and its activities as good and untainted, while the secular world is a wholly bad place that only corrupts people. The second result of dualism is that it isolates our personal beliefs from the way we actually live and work in the world. Christianity is seen as a means of individual spiritual peace and strength, not as a comprehensive interpretation of reality that affects everything we do.

Interestingly enough, dualistic Christianity is a result of legalistic Christianity. When we do not grasp the gospel of grace, we tend to hold a pharisaical obsession with religious purity. If we believe we are saved by the righteousness of our lives, it encourages us to stay within the church, so we don't have to risk being led astray by the outside world. And while the Bible tells us a great deal about how the church should operate, it doesn't give specific details about how to work in other vocations in a Christian way. That takes reflection, creativity, and constructive relationships with other Christians. Legalists see everything in black and white and cannot cope with this kind of flexibility and uncertainty. They are extremely concerned with knowing an exactly right, clearly defined biblical position on everything. For example, if a Christian actor cannot come up with an exact and detailed list of what roles they can take and what roles they cannot take, the legalist would prefer them not to act in "secular" work at all.

But Christianity is not a set of beliefs that should be held just to save our individual souls. It should also be an interpretation of (and a distinct way of understanding) everything in life. It must bring a unique perspective on human nature, right and wrong, justice, beauty, and character.

How is a Christian worldview distinct from all others? Many non-Christian worldviews believe the universe happened by accident. Others believe the physical universe is merely an illusion, and others still believe it was created—often out of a battle or struggle—and will be eventually destroyed. The Christian worldview is unique in believing that both the material and spiritual world:

- were **created** good;
- are now **fallen** (work is no longer for God's glory and the good of our neighbors [the two great commandments in Matthew 22:36–40] but to "make a name for ourselves" [Genesis 11:4]);
- are being **redeemed** (in other words, the creationally good structure of work is being redirected toward God and toward our neighbors' good);
- and will one day be fully **restored.** In the new heaven and new earth, the curse on work will finally be lifted, and society will be perfect and free from all sin, evil, injustice, suffering, corruption, and death.

When Christians see everything in the world as creationally good, fallen and affected by sin, and subject to the restoration of God's grace, we develop an illuminating worldview that answers our questions, informs our every action, and distinguishes itself from the rest of culture's narratives.

Non-Christian worldviews tend to demonize certain fallen but good things and blame all of the world's problems on them. On the other hand, they also tend to idolize certain good but fallen things and place all of their hopes in them. As professor of religion Albert Wolters says in his book *Creation Regained*:

> The great danger is to always single out some aspect of God's good creation and identify *it*, rather than the alien intrusion of sin, as the villain. Such an error conceives of the good-evil dichotomy as intrinsic to the creation itself ... something in the good creation is identified as [the source] of evil. In the course of history, this "something" has been variously identified as … the body and its passions (Plato and much of Greek philosophy), as culture in distinction from nature (Rousseau and Romanticism), as authority figures in society and family (psychodynamic psychology), as economic forces (Marx), as technology and management (Heidegger and existentialists). ... As far as I can tell, the Bible is unique in its rejection of all attempts to either demonize some part of creation as the root of our problems or idolize some part of creation as the solution. All other religions, philosophies, and worldviews in one way or another fall into the trap of [idolatry]—of failing to keep creation and fall distinct. And this trap is an ever-present danger for Christians [as well].[4]

There are many examples of how non-Christian ideologies reduce everything into the dichotomy of good and evil that Wolters mentions. Marx believed all human society's problems would be solved if the means of economic production were shared with all people. His proposed solution was a totalitarian state (a concept obviously rife with problems). Freud believed our problems came from repressing our deep desires for pleasure. His proposed solution was unrestricted freedom from moral guilt (also a flawed resolution). Plenty of people hold a worldview that espouses "traditional values"—the opposite of Freud's. They think the world's problems are the result of undisciplined, selfish people who don't submit to traditional moral values and family responsibilities. They believe that a moral "revival" in society or a return to the way things used to be will relieve the world of all its difficulties. And so on and so forth.

Only the Christian worldview identifies sin itself as the root of the world's problems—and it locates the solution in God's grace and the coming of his kingdom. Sin infects us all, and so we cannot simply divide the world into good people and bad people as so many worldviews do. Without an understanding of the nature of God's kingdom, we will be either naïvely utopian or cynical about society ever holding any good. We will demonize something that isn't entirely bad or idolize something that isn't entirely good.

To think about how worldviews affect our work, we must ask ourselves these questions:

- What worldviews are predominant in my profession? What are the common narratives of the culture I live in?

[4] Albert M. Wolters, *Creation Regained: Biblical Basics for a Reformational Worldview* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2005), 50.

- What are the underlying assumptions about meaning, morality, origin, and destiny in my field and my culture?
- What are the idols my culture puts its hopes in? What are the so-called demons it seeks to avoid?
- How do the worldviews in my culture affect both the form and content of *my* work? How can I not just work with excellence but with Christian distinctiveness?
- How can I love people and serve them in my work—the people I work with, the people I work for, the people who work for me, the people who receive my services, and the people who live in the community in which I work?
- Which parts of the dominant worldviews align with principles in the gospel? Which can I agree with and use?
- Which goals of the dominant worldviews are irresolvable without Christ? How can Christ fulfill those goals in a way society's idols can't? Where must I challenge my culture?
- What opportunities are there in my profession to act as a witness for Christ?

Every area of our world is broken by sin, and we are quick to make something besides the Lord our functional savior from this brokenness. On an individual level, for example, someone may believe that the affection of others will relieve the pain of their problems and thus make a god of human approval. But this results in the psychological disintegration of the individual, as they crave attention and affirmation and feel as if they can never have enough. On a corporate level, a group may make gods of profit or individual freedom as a means to cope with society's shortcomings. But worshiping these idols ironically results in the disintegration of a community's wellbeing. Although we should avoid the triumphalist intent to "redeem" an entire field like business or art—or culture entirely—we should remember that we *can* improve it or halt its deterioration by practicing work and cultural production in a way that is a sign of the kingdom.

SPIRITUALLY NURTURING THOSE IN DIFFERENT VOCATIONAL FIELDS

Spiritually nurturing specific vocations involves two major needs.

First, there is a need to provide workers with basic "means of grace." This includes prayer, mutual ministry with their peers, accountability, learning in community, and shepherding. The means of grace should both accommodate their work schedule and address the issues they encounter as a result of being in their field.

The way we minister to workers will differ depending on whether they have less agency or more agency in their job. To have "agency" means to have the freedom to choose one's work and workplace, and to have the power to influence one's working conditions. Most of the members in my first church in Hopewell, Virginia, worked in chemical plants in shifts. It became apparent

that the programs and ministries of the church made no time for those who worked the graveyard shift from 11:00 p.m. to 7:00 a.m. or the swing shift from 3:00 p.m. to 11:00 p.m. Sometimes, the roster changed each week. Many workers who are not in white-collar professions lack flexibility in their schedule, and the church must recognize this. Working five days a week from nine to five is not a reality for many people, especially those who work more than one job to make ends meet. As faith and work ministries have developed over the past twenty years, these workers in inflexible jobs have been largely overlooked.

On the other hand, many white-collar careers are also increasingly different from a traditional work schedule. More and more, these jobs require long workdays, cross-country travel, seasons of intense work, and seasons of very little. As a result, many who are moving up in these careers find it difficult to access the normal avenues for spiritual nurturing provided by churches, such as weeknight small groups and even Sunday services. Churches must find ways to accommodate these circumstances. One way to do this is to supplement face-to-face get-togethers with online meetings. It is all the more important to embed faith and work into the preaching of worship services if professionals simply cannot participate in midweek programs.

The second major need in spiritually nurturing specific vocations is addressing the spiritual and moral issues that are specific to workers' professions. There are particular ethical quandaries, temptations, discouragements, and other challenges that confront Christians in any given profession. Many churches' efforts to spiritually nurture congregants only address generic or widely understood matters of the private, individual world. But we spend most of our waking hours in our vocational field, and so we need to hear how other Christians have dealt with the same problems we face in the workplace every day. Some vocations are so hard and demanding that Christians will drop out of them if they don't receive a great deal of specific encouragement and support.

Of course, a balance must be struck here. When it comes to how we minister, it would be wrong to completely segregate Christians by vocation. Out in the world, there is a lot of hostility between members of certain kinds of professions, and it is liberating and healthy in the Christian community to build friendships across those barriers. Some people will not want or need spiritual nurturing that is specific to their vocation. But there are many others who need intentional care to help them navigate the temptations and quandaries of their vocation. Otherwise, Christians who climb the corporate ladder will do so at the expense of their conscience; they won't see any way to move ahead and stay true to their principles, and so they either abandon or water down their beliefs.

When a church establishes a fellowship for a certain field—a gathering for artists or financial workers, for example—these fellowships often have an interesting evangelistic edge. Often, non-Christian members of the profession will be attracted to the thoughtful and supportive groups of Christian colleagues whose work they respect.

COOPERATING AND CREATING CULTURE

Christians must help one another do their work with diligence and excellence—and create positive culture as a result. Of course, this will look different in each vocational area. In some areas, seeking to work with excellence requires mentoring relationships. Those who are more experienced or accomplished in their field should make themselves available to those who are newer in the faith or the field. This may take the form of mentoring, counseling, or even outright instruction. It may include helping younger people navigate their way forward in their field, connecting them with resources or key people, and opening doors of opportunity for them. In other vocational areas, it might mean cooperative ventures, such as an artistic project, journal, movie, or creating a new business. The possibilities are endless.

The reason this paper first explored worldview and spiritual nurturing before examining the idea of working cooperatively is because if the first two factors are neglected, Christians' cooperative ventures are often poorly conceived. Many "Christian businesses" are those that simply only hire Christians rather than a business that has theologically thought out its financial practices, personnel policies, and entire mission. Many "Christian art" productions are really just ways to pull artists out of the world and into a Christian subculture. In general, cooperating to produce culture that renews the world does not mean Christians banding together to leave the big, bad world but rather working together (usually with non-Christians) to serve the world. This cannot happen if we hold a sectarian mindset and do not have a desire to better the public sphere.

THE ALIENATION OF WORKERS

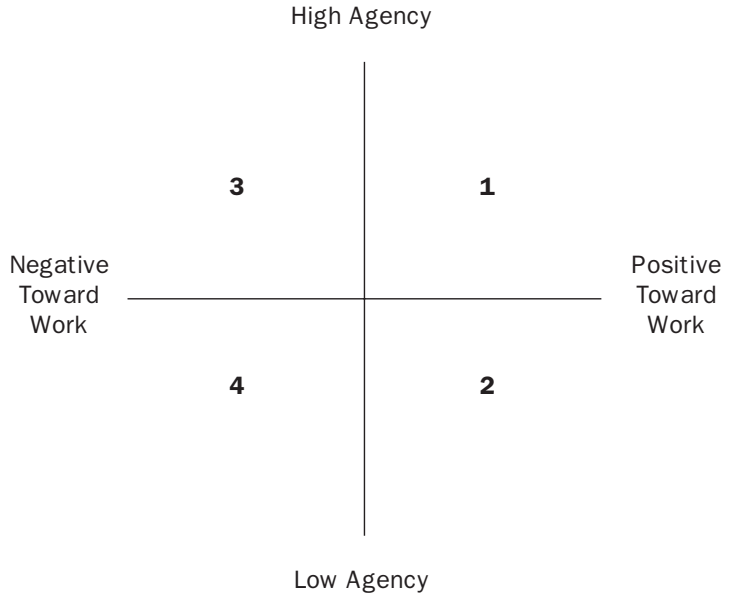
It is important to recognize the different ways human beings can experience work. Because work is a good creation of God *and* cursed by sin, people can experience alienation in their jobs in various ways.

One way people can be alienated from their work is by having little or no enjoyment in its everyday tasks. They may be tedious, mind-numbing, difficult, exhausting, and so on. People may experience this if they are in jobs that do not fit their aptitudes and abilities, but they may also experience it because some work necessary for the common good simply *is* uninteresting, difficult, or draining. (Recall the phrase, "It's a dirty job, but somebody's got to do it.") The work may also be unsatisfying because the human relationships within it keep breaking down, meaning colleagues are difficult to work with and different personality types often clash.

Another way people can be alienated is by having little agency in their work. Many economists speak of people who inhabit a space between the working class and the poor—people who live precariously on the verge of poverty—and who therefore have almost no say in their working

conditions or how to perform their tasks. Because of their desperation and lack of social, economic, and cultural capital, they are at the mercy (or lack of mercy) of employers who may be exploitative.

We can chart these forms of alienation in this way:



Quadrant 1 is filled with professionals who are often highly paid and have a high level of satisfaction and agency. At the other end of the spectrum, Quadrant 4 is filled with people who are poorly paid and have little say about their work conditions. These people are often on the margins of society and are mistreated, as they do difficult and unsatisfying work.

We cannot conduct faith and work ministry and ignore the people in any quadrant, though local churches tend not to have equal representation from every quadrant and must pay particular attention to the people God has led to their congregation.

Paul speaks to believers in Quadrant 4 when he addresses Christians who are slaves working for non-Christian masters. This is a first-century parallel to contemporary people who live in poverty or are in an economically precarious position, often exploited by certain industries. In 1 Corinthians 7:21, Paul tells slaves to obtain their freedom if they can, but if they cannot, he lays out a simple but profound principle that can help the exploited worker resist the way work can crush their dignity.[5] Paul says to "serve wholeheartedly, as if you were serving the Lord, not people, because you know that the Lord will reward each one for whatever good they do, whether they are slave or free" (Ephesians 6:7–8). Paul does not make light of the plight of slaves. He tells them to do two things. First, they should lift their eyes to look past their bosses and up to the

[5] For an excellent treatment of the 1 Corinthians 7:21ff passage, see R. E. Ciampa and B. S. Rosner's *The First Letter to the Corinthians*, Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2010), 306–328. They write, "Paul has been careful not to make light of the circumstances of Christian slaves," 327.

Lord. They should work to please him, not people, doing their best to do good through their work for God's sake. Second, they should look ahead to the day when God will put all things right. They are reminded that every obstacle, injustice, and hardship will one day be wiped away as the world is restored by God. These two principles can ennoble any kind of worker and prevent employers from destroying their dignity.

Once again, eschatology comes into play when understanding our work. Because we have an unimaginable reward in Christ (verse 8), our job satisfaction does not have to be wholly dependent on our paycheck. A parallel passage reads, "Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord, not for human masters, since you know that you will receive an inheritance from the Lord as a reward" (Colossians 3:23–24). The inheritance Paul speaks of is the new heaven and new earth. Work is not primarily a grinding necessity or a path to self-worth. It is a way to please God by doing his work in the world, for his sake.

FOR PREACHING AND PASTORING: HOW THE GOSPEL SHAPES OUR WORK

Here are five major principles that are useful when speaking on faith and work. The following five ideas can be preached from a variety of texts and can be supported by numerous practical stories and case studies. I give only the barest sketches here, but I hope they serve as a good starting point.

The gospel gives us inner spiritual peace, without which work can drain us. This is important for professionals who tend to obtain their identity from their work and experience emotional devastation by a lack of success or promotion. This is just as true for the marginalized, those who feel they have no power or prospects for upward mobility or improvement of conditions. The gospel gives us an identity not based on performance and which protects us from both the ego inflation of success and the emotional destruction of failure.

The gospel shows us the dignity and usefulness of all work, without which work can bore us. Many can easily find their work dull and boring and therefore do it without energy and diligence. But a biblical theology of work shows how all work has the greatest dignity, participates in God's work of caring for creation, and should be done more with an eye to God (Ephesians 6:7) than to human supervisors.

The gospel gives us a moral compass, without which work can corrupt us. In secular societies, profit margins are increasingly the only determinant of behavior. Companies are willing to engage in any legal activity that maximizes profits, no matter how exploitative. In many traditional societies, there is a culture of bribery and cronyism. The pressures on all workers to jettison ethics are enormous. Christians, however, have a strong moral compass that helps them resist these temptations.

The gospel gives us a worldview, without which work can cause us to conform to a secular worldview. As noted before, everyone does their work from within a worldview—one that

assumes certain things about human nature, moral values, human purpose, and more. Unless Christians have a clear understanding of their own worldview, they will be pressured to "conform to the pattern of this world" (Romans 12:2) by working within the framework of the worldviews dominating their vocational field.

The gospel gives us hope, without which work can crush our spirit. Some enter their professions full of an expectation to "make a difference" or "change the world." But soon they see how enormous the forces stacked against them are—forces against change in any part of human culture and society. Others are part of the exploited workforce, people who are always on the cusp of poverty and feel crushed by the current economic system. The Christian doctrine of hope—in particular, the already-but-not-yet nature of the kingdom of God—is an enormous resource for all. It guards Christians from utopian, naïve optimism about what they can accomplish in this life and at the same time prevents despondence over work. Faith is a way to bring the "already" of the not-yet kingdom into the present. (For more on this, see the passage in Isaiah 60:1–22 on the new heaven and new earth, and on the commerce and the "ships of Tarshish" in the kingdom of God.[6])

REASONS THE CHURCH CAN FAIL AT INTEGRATING FAITH AND WORK

Faith and work integration is not something for which ministers are trained. In our theological and ministry education, leaders learn to disciple people by bringing them into the church world—into lay leadership and church program participation. They are not equipped, however, to disciple them for their work worlds.

Faith and work integration is horizontal rather than vertical. When training those in our congregation for evangelism, for example, we ministers are usually the experts that pour our knowledge into those with less knowledge. This is vertical, top-down instruction. In faith and work integration, however, the church members who know their vocational field are equal partners—they have expertise in some things while ministers have expertise in others (such as the Bible and theology). We all come to the puzzle with different pieces and fit them together to learn. This is horizontal, communal learning.

Faith and work integration is often ignored until other, more "important" priorities are already going well. It is seen as an extra instead of an integral context. When done well, faith and work may actually solve the "important" things ministers want to solve (attendance, tithing, heart renewal, and more).[7]

Faith and work integration is more about wisdom than hard and fast rules. One reason many ministers are uncomfortable in this arena is because, while the Bible gives us many general

[6] Thanks to ministry leader Missy Wallace for this insight.

[7] Again, thanks to Missy Wallace for this idea.

principles that can be applied to work in a variety of ways, it does not give many clear, absolute rules. For example, there are a lot of rules for married life in the Bible, including sexual ethics. But is there one Christian way to run a business? Is there a single way to be a Christian artist? No. The book of Proverbs teaches us about wisdom, the ability to make the wisest and best decision in situations in which there is no rule prescribing *one* right thing to do. Faith and work largely require this sort of wisdom, which many modern Christians find murky.

Faith and work integration requires a mixture of the scattered and gathered church. Many say, "The church's job is not to change culture—it's to preach the Word." This is largely right. But the church should disciple individuals to integrate their faith with their work so that *they* go out into the world as salt and light. As individuals and in associations and organizations, they can begin to partially renew the broken creation now.[8]

[8] For many ideas throughout this paper, thanks go to Missy Wallace, Lauren Gill, Dennae Pierre, Kimberly Deckel, and Marcelo Robles.

ADDITIONAL READING RECOMMENDED BY CITY TO CITY

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PART SIXTEEN

Marriage and Sexuality

One reality of the city is that its beliefs on marriage, singleness, sexuality, and gender generally do not align with biblical teaching. Churches in the city will inevitably find themselves facing the collision of these two belief systems. After all, cities often have a great number of single adults who espouse unrestrained sexual freedom, and are also home to prominent LGBTQ+ communities. Biblical ethics about sex are far different from the city's and are therefore viewed as offensive by many urban dwellers. Indeed, one of the most common objections non-Christians have toward the Christian faith centers on the church's view of sex. As existing Christians are discipled, they too raise questions not just about sex but also about marriage and singleness. Many wish to know what the role of the single adult in the church is, or if they must be married to be a "complete" Christian. Knowing how to speak about these subjects is crucial, and so we must be prepared to discuss them in a way befitting of the gospel.

While most of the following material addresses the assault against biblical sex ethics mounted by Western society (especially since the 1960s), it is still relevant to ministry leaders in any major global city. In non-Western cultures, such as mainland China, India, and Muslim nations, Christians are often caught between the beliefs of those who are Westernized and those who are traditional. For example, a non-Western country with a large population of young adults using social media may begin to adopt secular views of sexual freedom and gender fluidity. The same country may also have a large traditional population that holds to existing principles, such as those found in Hinduism, Islam, Catholicism, Eastern Orthodoxy, or East Asian belief systems. Often, the sexual ethics in non-Western countries can be repressive, used as a means to control society; and some can be especially oppressive to women. Because Christian churches often resist both of these sexual ideologies in some way, they will seem too Western and lenient for some and too traditional and restrictive for others.

In the West, Christian churches are largely seen as regressive and "on the wrong side of history." Younger generations in particular find the biblical sex ethic to be a—often *the*—major barrier to faith. No matter where our churches are based, we must express the Bible's teachings on sexuality without compromise—and anticipate objections.[1]

[1] Due to this paper's limitation of space, I will not include much reflection on parenting when discussing the Christian view of family, nor much on transgenderism when discussing sexuality. Nevertheless, these are two increasingly important matters about which Christians must be knowledgeable and prepared to discuss. For resources about these topics recommended by City to City, see the Recommended Resources section at the end of the paper.

THE CHRISTIAN VIEW OF FAMILY

In order to understand the Bible's view on sex as a whole, it is helpful to start by examining its view of the family. Just as Christianity's view of sex differs from contemporary society's, its view of family is similarly distinguished from that of other historical societies. By the time Christianity was established, nearly all religions and cultures made an absolute value of the family and of bearing children—no one had individual honor if their entire family didn't have honor, and no one had a legacy or lasting significance if they didn't have heirs. Single adulthood was seen as an inferior way of life.

By contrast, Christianity was the first major worldview that presented single adulthood as a viable way of life. After all, Jesus himself was single; as was Paul, one of the most influential members of the early church. The church did not pressure people to marry in order to be "true" Christians or members of society, and it institutionally supported widows of marriageable age, so they did not have to remarry to survive. Sociologist of religion Rodney Stark notes:

> Should they be widowed, Christian women enjoyed substantial advantages. Pagan widows faced great social pressure to remarry; Augustus even had widows fined if they failed to marry within two years. In contrast, among Christians, widowhood was highly respected and remarriage was, if anything, mildly discouraged. The church stood ready to sustain poor widows, allowing them a choice as to whether or not to remarry. [Single widows were active in care-giving and good deeds in the neighborhood.][2]

American theologian and ethicist Stanley Hauerwas agrees that "one … clear difference between Christianity and Judaism [and all other traditional religions] is the former's entertainment of the idea of singleness as the paradigm way of life for its followers."[3] The gospel transforms an idolized conception of marriage into a biblically healthy one. Discussing the early church mentality, Hauerwas continues:

> We must remember that the "sacrifice" made by Christian singles was not so much "giving up sex" but in giving up heirs. There could be no more radical act than that! This was a clear expression that one's future is not guaranteed by the [biological] family, but by the [family of God, the] church … both singleness and marriage are symbolic institutions for the constitution of the church's witness of the kingdom. Neither can be valid without the other. If singleness is a symbol of the church's

[2] Rodney Stark, *The Rise of Christianity: How the Obscure, Marginal Jesus Movement became the Dominant Religious Force in the Western World in a Few Centuries* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996), 104.

[3] Stanley Hauerwas, *A Community of Character: Toward a Constructive Christian Social Ethic* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1991), 174.

> confidence in God's power to convert lives for the growth of the church, marriage and procreation is the symbol of the church's hope for the world. For Christians do not place their hope in their children, but rather their children are a sign of their hope … that God has not abandoned this world.[4]

Therein lies the point of these resolutions on singleness and marriage: the family of God, the church, is the most fundamental family we need. To be a part of it is to get a foretaste of the future in which all of humanity's relationships will be healed.

This primacy of God's family enables us to avoid two dangers. The first is the idolatry of marriage, biological children, and family. The family of God (and our spousal relationship to Christ as seen in Ephesians 5:22 and onward) can sustain us throughout life if we are single or childless. And, as Christian authors such as theologian Sam Allberry write, men and women who experience same-sex attraction and seek to be faithful to the biblical view of sex heavily rely on being part of a church family and fostering friendship with fellow believers.[5] Christian families must not concentrate on their biological families so much that they neglect building up the family of God in their local church.

The family of God also enables us to avoid the opposite problem: the fear of getting married, having children, and losing what we believe to be our individual independence. Christianity gives us hope that having a family can be a blessing rather than a practice to be feared. It tells us that we choose between marriage and singleness not for the contemporary motive of personal fulfillment, or for the traditional motive of garnering status or honor through a family and children. Rather, we marry—or do not marry—according to what best makes us a sign of God's kingdom. For example, Hauerwas says that single Christian adults were a startling witness to the coming kingdom in the ancient world. They showed that their hope and significance was not in heirs but in the kingdom. But both then (and especially now), being married is also a way to be a sign of the kingdom.

This is a key reason the Bible forbids us from knowingly marrying someone who doesn't share our faith (2 Corinthians 6:14). One of the main purposes of marriage is to build kingdom-exhibiting community—to show the world how Christ transforms everything, including marriage. This is difficult to do (if not impossible) if both spouses aren't believers. A Christian who willingly marries a non-believer shows that their motives are not grounded in exhibiting God's kingdom.

The purpose of both singleness *and* marriage is to create communities that are a sign of the glory of the coming (and present) kingdom of God. To have this type of community, every church needs a combination of both married couples and singles. Both of these groups can minister to each other, have unique advantages in ministry, and point to the hope of Christ in different ways.

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[4] Ibid., 190–191.

[5] See Sam Allberry, *Is God Anti-Gay? And Other Questions about Homosexuality, the Bible, and Same-Sex Attraction* (Epsom, England: The Good Book Company, 2013); Ed Shaw, *The Plausibility Problem: The Church and Same Sex Attraction* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2015).

It should be noted that marrying and starting families in urban environments poses certain challenges. Christians who live in the city with children often consider leaving because property is expensive and finding schooling can be complicated. But Christians should also be challenged to recognize how urban living can help a child grow up wise and resourceful, as well as prompting a whole family to consider themselves on the mission field in ways they might not in less populated places.[6]

CONTRASTING VISIONS OF SEXUALITY

The Christian sex ethic can be stated with great simplicity: sex should only be had by a husband and wife. Today, many will respond to that ethic with two questions. One is, "Why is sex outside of marriage wrong?" The other is, "Why is sex with someone of the same gender wrong?" Sometimes, Christian teachers simply answer, "Because God says so in his Word." For faithful Christians, this is a sufficient reason to accept the biblical sex ethic. But this statement will not be enough to convince many skeptics.

To grant a fuller explanation of the Christian view of sex, we must communicate the vision behind it. In ancient Western culture, the early church's message about sex prevailed not merely because of Christianity's ethical code but because of its radical vision. They made it clear that sex is part of reflecting the image of God—its foundational concepts must therefore reflect God and, in particular, his redeeming love. Sex is not about enhancing one's power, as so many at the time (and today) believed, but about mutually giving up power to one another in love, as Christ did for us. The Christian view of sex gets us into the very heart of the gospel and is a positive, fulfilling one rather than a needlessly restrictive one.

The biblical view of sexuality is too often presented strictly in terms of moral prohibitions—that is, in a totally negative way. But at the highest, most visionary level, the biblical teaching on this issue begins with a vision for human sexuality that aligns with the pattern of God's saving love for us in Christ (see more on this later in the paper). Because sex was created with specific purposes in mind, the biblical teaching about sexuality is the way to human flourishing. We only become all we were created to be—and sex only becomes an enriching, joyful, and life-giving agent—when we live according to God's created purposes for us. And in all cases, living according to God's created purposes for us entails moral boundaries and practices—things we should and should not do.

By contrast, Western society's view of sex today is tightly connected to the cultural narrative that we are only free if we can define ourselves—our own identity and morality—without hindrance from family, community, tradition, or religion. Instead of honoring sex as something created with principles and guidelines that lead to our flourishing, this culture uses sex in a

[6] See also Kathy Keller's list of reasons why the city can be a good place to raise children: "Why the City is a Wonderful Place to Raise Children," *The Gospel Coalition*, February 14, 2012, https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/why-the-city-is-a-wonderful-place-to-raise-children/.

self-serving and non-restrictive way to feel fulfilled. The choice to have sex in whatever way we choose is seen as crucial to having an authentic self. It is all about the fulfillment and actualization of *ourselves*, not anyone else.

Western culture does say it's only right to have sex if it is consensual—if the other person agrees to the sexual encounter and also finds that it enhances their identity, fulfillment, and self-interest. But because sex is strictly for the benefit of the individual, this consent is only half-realized. It is consent to give oneself physically but not to give oneself emotionally, socially, economically, and personally. There is no interdependence, only independence. Because there are to be no strings attached and no loss of individual independence in any way, this consent is a shallow, incomplete version of the consent that comes from a married relationship.

It is no secret that this type of sex fails at what it aims to achieve and leaves countless people feeling hurt, confused, and incomplete. The whole concept of the modern self is that we look at our deepest internal desires to find out who we are, and that we freely determine our moral values on the basis of who we are and what seems right to us. But this is a futile way to live life and will never lead to true fulfillment or actualization, and a society full of individuals who think like this will certainly not succeed in working together to create a better world.

Because sex plays such an important part in this view of the modern self, it is crucial to recognize the ways the Christian sex ethic differs from the predominant Western worldview and creates a compelling alternative. As I mentioned earlier, the Christian view of sex is tightly connected to the main biblical narrative (and therefore cosmic order), namely the saving love of God for us in Jesus Christ. When sex takes place outside of marriage, its attempts at love fail to conform to the pattern of divine love and spiritual union with Christ. Christ gave himself completely to us—forever and always—through the incarnation and atonement. We then give our whole lives to him in an exclusive, longform, covenantal relationship.

Love and sex were created to be intricately bound. Much as Western culture would like to think, it can never be a merely physical encounter with no strings attached. Sex is for the benefit of a relationship, to strengthen and enrich the bond between two people; and to truly consent to it means the lifelong commitment of their lives to each other legally, socially, economically, emotionally, and spiritually.

Anything less leaves us feeling incomplete. When we only give our bodies (and some degree of affection) to each other without giving our entire selves, we split ourselves in a way that feels dissonant. Our minds may try to rationalize us into thinking that sex is only about our self-fulfillment, but there is an inescapable feeling that it should be something deeply committal, communal, and spiritual—something more. Because of this, after having nonmarital sex with someone, it is natural to think that the other person has committed his or herself to us, when really they haven't. It is no wonder, then, that heartbreak is so common after temporary sexual encounters. Ultimately, we feel objectified and used by the other for his or her self-interest instead of being truly loved. Women in particular feel this dissonance and objectification in

casual sex.[7] And perhaps worst of all, when sex is used not for self-giving but for self-gratification, it can erode our ability to bind to others through sex. We diminish its sacred qualities, making it seem like just another appetite within us, which leads to all sorts of hurt as well as harmful effects.

Sex outside of marriage contains these problems because we are not using sex in the manner for which it was created. The biblical sex ethic, however, elevates sex from a mere consumer good into a way to create the deepest community between two human beings. And it honors and resembles the One who has given himself wholly for us so we can be liberated to give ourselves wholly and exclusively to him.

While Western culture requires a thin kind of consent in sex, the Bible requires a fuller, more satisfying commitment. Sex is not for those who give temporary consent for a purely physical encounter but for those who give permanent consent to each other through marriage. Christians see sex as a kind of sacrament within marriage—a way to renew covenantal love by using the mutual giving of bodies as a symbol of the giving of one's entire life. Put another way, sex is a "commitment apparatus" for strengthening the marriage. Sex is God's way for two people to say to one another, "I belong exclusively and permanently to you," something that can only be said honestly within the binding covenant of marriage. When used in this way, sex becomes a way to acknowledge this commitment and relive the original covenant made between two people. This renews, deepens, and enriches the trust and love between a couple. Because God never meant for sex to be anything other than this, any attempt to redefine what sex means is to forsake its intended purpose and exchange its benefits for brokenness.

The above description of the Christian sex ethic must be the core of public teaching on sexuality. Note that it addresses not just homosexuality but also the Western view of identity and sexuality that all sexual immorality depends upon. This leads to a fuller description of the biblical vision of sex rather than simply villainizing homosexual individuals.

BIBLICAL TEACHING ON SEXUALITY

The Bible's teaching on sexuality (particularly 1 Corinthians 6:9–7:5) teaches us the following.

Sexuality is shaped for covenant. Some Christians in Corinth thought that because they had been saved by grace and freed from a legalistic obedience to the Mosaic law, they could have sex as they pleased (1 Corinthians 6:12–13). The desire to have sex, they thought, is just a natural appetite to fulfill in the same way we eat when we are hungry. But Paul says that sex must be "beneficial," using a Greek word that means to edify others. The purpose of sex is to create deep community and oneness between two people around which a family can be built. Paul repeats Genesis 2:24 in verse 16 to make the same point. To fit our bodies together physically should

[7] See Christine Emba, *Rethinking Sex: A Provocation* (London: Penguin, 2022).

always and only be part of uniting two lives together in every respect. It is a monstrous incongruity to activate the apparatus of sex—to give our body to create "one flesh"—without giving our whole life to the other person.

Sexuality has no double standards. In the Roman world, wives were not allowed to have sex outside of marriage, but husbands were free to do so—and even expected to. Paul not only condemns this and requires equal standards for men and women, but in 1 Corinthians 7:3–5 says that *both* husband and wife have "authority" over the other's body—even inside marriage, sex has to be by mutual consent. This belief was absolutely radical for its time.

Sexuality is shaped by our bodies. Some Christians in Corinth thought they could have sex as they pleased because their bodies weren't really important. They adopted the classical Greco-Roman idea that the body is merely the discardable container of the soul. But Paul says the body is *not* ultimately temporary and that it will be raised from the dead (1 Corinthians 6:14). The physical body is not just a receptacle for the "real self"—the soul—but is actually part of ourselves. By nature, our physical bodies are ordered toward heterosexuality, the only kind of sex that produces new human life. This *must* tell us something about how the body should be used in sex, and why Paul condemns homosexuality (6:9–10).

Sexuality is shaped by the gospel. Today, Christianity's sex ethic seems more restrictive than the modern sex ethic, but Christianity's underlying vision of sexuality is infinitely higher and more wonderful than modernity's. Paul reminds us that Christ has so given himself to us that now we are completely one with him. By asking, "Shall I then take the members of Christ and unite them with a prostitute?" (6:15), he hints at the explicit statement in Ephesians 5:25–31 that marital, sexual love points to God's saving love for us. In Christ, God gives himself to us and we to him in an exclusive, lifelong union. We must do no less with sex in marriage. Anglican priest and theologian Anthony Thiselton writes of these verses in 1 Corinthians 6, "[I]n the context equally of union with Christ and of physical union the issue becomes one of fully giving oneself to the one to whom one belongs."[8]

Sexuality is not porneia. The Greek word *porneia*, translated as "sexual immorality" (6:18), is extremely important to understand. In common Greek, it usually meant prostitution, but in the Greek Old Testament it was used to translate the spiritual adultery of idolatry. This is most likely why Paul takes hold of the term and fills it with distinctly Christian content. Sexuality is created to be a theological sign of Christ's saving love for us, which is always within an exclusive covenantal relationship. *Porneia* therefore refers to any human sexuality that does not reflect God's saving love, including homosexuality, premarital sex, and extramarital sex.[9]

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[8] Anthony Thiselton, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2000), 474.

[9] See Kyle Harper, *From Shame to Sin: The Christian Transformation of Sexual Morality in Late Antiquity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2013), 85.

BIBLICAL TEACHING ON MARRIAGE

From the outset, marriage is clearly defined by a set of principles in the Bible. Genesis 1:27–28 and 2:18–24, for example, show us that marriage is marked by the following characteristics:

Divine institution. Marriage is the invention of God himself and therefore is woven into the very fabric of our human nature. While not all people are called by God to marry, the human race as a whole is designed for it. No society can thrive without healthy marriages.

The priority of the spouse. We are to leave our father and mother to "cleave" to our spouse. This means our spouse and marriage must have uncontested priority in our heart over any other earthly attachment.

The unification of our whole lives. The term "one flesh" denotes sexual union, of course, but the repetition of the idea of being "united" means that the physical union of sex must be (and may only be) a sign of a covenant in which two people give their lives to become one in all manner of non-physical ways—legally, economically, socially, and so forth. In other words, sexual union is only for the context of a committed marriage.

Complementary otherness. God made the married sexual union between a man and a woman to mirror our union with God through Christ (Ephesians 5:22–33). Just as he gave himself wholly to us so we can live wholly for him in a binding covenant of love, so too we are to achieve true intimacy within a marriage bond. And just as Christ bridged a divide between two deeply different beings—God and humanity—so too is marriage a union of the differences of male and female.

Marriage *must* be gender diverse. When God made humanity in his image to reflect his glory, he made us both male and female (Genesis 1:27). Thus, only male and female together reflect the full range of God's excellencies. Male and female each have unique perspectives, wisdom, qualities, and glories that the other cannot reproduce. The Hebrew origin of the word "helper" in Genesis 2:20 means one who has a strength or ability that we do not have and yet we need. This means woman is man's irreplaceable complement, and man is woman's irreplaceable complement. Marriage was created "for this reason" (verse 24, NASB) and refers back to man's recognition of woman's sameness ("bone of my bones") yet complementary otherness (receiving the identity of "woman" and not "man").

Because both male and female bring unique strengths to the table, no marriage should be excluded from having both. In other instances, Western society is quick to advocate gender diversity—California Senate Bill 826, for example, said it was wrong for publicly traded companies to not have both men and women on their boards. Christians believe it would be just as wrong for marriages not to have both a man and a woman. We believe a marriage of the same gender fails to practice the gender diversity we (and many non-Christians) wish to see in other areas of life.

As evidence that what the Bible says is true—that God honors the sexual union of man and woman in marriage—only the sexual union of male and female can produce new human life. Each produces something the other cannot to create children. And years upon years of social science tell us that children produced by such a union thrive best when raised by a father and a mother who have a stable marriage. All in all, the gospel breaks barriers between male and female

both in Christian communities and out in the world, enabling us to give our complementary help to the other and start families in the best possible circumstances.

Does this mean that any single adult who is unmarried is incomplete? No. As I explain below, that cannot be true. If it *were* true, Jesus—our perfect example of the righteousness God calls us toward—would have been married.

BIBLICAL TEACHING ON SINGLENESS

Paul gives us useful insight on the nature of singleness in 1 Corinthians 7:25–39 and Ephesians 5:32 and its following verses. First of all, single individuals are to be accepted and supported by the church. Paul famously says that singles should neither feel the necessity to marry *nor* the necessity to remain single (1 Corinthians 7:25–28). Christianity was the first religion or worldview to hold up singleness as a legitimate life path for an adult. Remember that during biblical times there was no long-term economic security apart from having children. Women, especially, could not easily get jobs to provide for themselves. But the early church pressed no one to marry for this reason and even made financial provision for widows so they didn't have to wed unless they wished (1 Timothy 5).

Why were singles given so much support and acceptance in the church? Behind the insistence in 1 Corinthians 7:29 that "the time is short" is a sophisticated view of history. Like Jesus, Paul taught the "overlap of the ages." The kingdom of God—God's power to renew the whole of creation—broke into the old world through Christ's first coming. Now, the kingdom is here in a substantial but partial way (Romans 13:11–14). Because it is not yet here in full, all of the social and material concerns of this world still exist. But the gospel brings us an internal joy, peace, and hope in the future that relativizes all our earthly relationships. We no longer look for our deepest security and significance in marriage or wealth or children; we know we are assured citizenship in God's kingdom and that he will provide all we need. This assurance gives us a new kind of freedom. We are to be neither too elated by success nor too downcast by disappointment, because our true success is in God (Colossians 3:1–4). Though we have possessions, we should live as if they are temporary and not really ours, for our real wealth is in God (Luke 16:1 and following verses).

Paul applies this principle to marriage and singleness. We are neither overzealous about getting married nor overly disappointed by not being so, because Christ is the only spouse that can truly fulfill us, and God's family is the only family that will truly embrace and satisfy us (Ephesians 5:21 and following verses). As stated earlier, we can be a sign of the kingdom whether we have a spouse or not.

If singles marry, they must marry "in the Lord." There is no biblical prohibition against marrying someone of another class, race, or nationality,[10] but there are many against marry-

[10] The Old Testament prohibition against Jews marrying non-Jews is understood as forbidding the marriage of a believer in Yahweh to an idolater. In short, it is primarily a prohibition against marriage to someone of a different religious faith.

ing outside one's faith. The biblical directive that single Christians should only marry other Christians (1 Corinthians 7:39) is one of the more unpopular and seemingly bigoted biblical teachings. But its motivation is anything but bigoted. To marry someone who does not believe in Christ is to marry someone who will never understand our deepest motivations or understand how our heart works—and that is a recipe for disaster. If we can only marry "in the Lord," our pool of candidates shrinks drastically. But if a single Christian remains single largely because they will not compromise on this point, then they are paying a price for the kingdom. Such Christians are promised to be blessed for this (1 Peter 4:13–14, 19) and God will use their singleness to minister to others in ways that married people cannot (see 1 Corinthians 7:32–35).

If singles marry, they must marry to serve each other's growth into Christlikeness. Christ's goal in his relationship with the church is to bring about our radiance, our beauty, and our cleansing from sin and all unholiness (Ephesians 5:26–27). But this is not an impersonal task. Jesus wants to present us "to himself," which he does in self-giving love (Ephesians 5:26). There is also an implied but unmistakable sense of joy in Jesus' doing this.

Ephesians 5:25–28 directly links the purpose of human marriage to Jesus' purpose in his "marriage" to the church: "Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her to make her holy" (verses 25–26a). Secular Western culture sees the purpose of marriage as transactional, mutual fulfillment. By contrast, Ephesians 5 teaches that one of the purposes of Christian marriage is covenantal, mutual sanctification.

The Bible esteems marriage as one of the best possible ways to learn about our sins and grow out of them by speaking the truth in love with one another. This process takes sacrifice on the part of the spouse. It is not an easy process, and it is often threatening and painful. Marriage is a vehicle for helping our spouses become more like Christ through sacrificial service. We are to celebrate the glorious things God is doing in our spouse's life.

None of these attributes fit into the contemporary model of marrying for personal fulfillment. Of course, in the long run they make for an extremely fulfilling marriage if both partners enter the covenant relationship with mutual sanctification as the goal. But few people do so. Contemporary singles often want a partner who already "has it together," is low maintenance, and will not require them to rearrange their life. No wonder it is so hard to find candidates like this!

While there have been many happy exceptions, Christian singles in cities may be tempted to operate in the same way as the surrounding culture. Prospective marriage candidates may be eliminated from consideration on the basis of their looks, polish, wealth, or social status. Just like everyone else, Christians too can find themselves looking for someone already beautiful and complete in the most superficial way. Instead, we should realize that our spouse will be incomplete, and that we should instead become committed to our spouse's future glory. We should want to do whatever it takes to be a vehicle for their sanctification.

CONCLUSIONS ON MARRIAGE AND SINGLENESS

Having a truly high view of marriage means we see the goodness of marriage *and* of singleness. There is no higher view of marriage than the one depicted in Ephesians 5. Marriage is both a signpost pointing to God's redemption of us in Christ and our future union with him. Genesis adds that marriage was instituted by God to be a major part of how human beings live, thrive, and steward God's creation. By showing sanctification as a purpose of marriage, Ephesians 5 also undermines the modern drive to find a marriage partner who is perfect and will require little from us. In every way, the Bible lifts up the idea of marriage, removes the potential fears of it, and encourages people to enter into such a union.

Yet Ephesians 5:21 and onward also supports the goodness of singleness! How are both of these viewpoints not contradictory? The Bible's exalted view of marriage tells us that it is only penultimate. It points to the real marriage that our souls need (union with Christ) and the real family our hearts want (those in the church). The overlap of the ages means that in this broken world, marriage is only a partial help, not a total panacea. No marriage will completely give us what we want or need.

The view of marriage in Ephesians 5 holds that even Christians married to other Christians will do a terrible job of conducting their marriage if they don't have a deeply fulfilling relationship with Christ now and an ultimate hope in a perfect relationship to come. Without that, married people will put too much pressure on their marriage to fulfill them, which will always cause dissatisfaction in their lives and brokenness in their relationships.

If singles don't have a fulfilling relationship with Jesus, they will put pressure on their *dream* of marriage, which will create dissatisfaction and brokenness in their lives as well. But if singles instead rest in and rejoice in their marriage to Christ, they will be able to not only handle single life but also flourish within it. Singles must realize that the same idolatry of marriage that distorts their single lives would or will distort their married lives.

What are some practical implications for the church that can be gathered from these principles? Unfortunately, many churches imbibe society's view of marriage more than the gospel's. Often, married individuals are unintentionally viewed as more "complete" than others, which can either make single adults feel like oddities who are not truly included or objects of well-meaning but patronizing pity.

Gospel-based communities should hold a view of singleness contrary to the idolatry of marriage often seen in contemporary culture. It should free singles from the shame of being unmarried. It should speak realistically, not sentimentally, about marriage even while encouraging it. Singles should be equal members and leaders in the church.

DISCUSSIONS ABOUT SEXUAL ETHICS

In today's culture, conversations about sexual ethics can be difficult whether they take place inside the church or outside it. But the Bible gives us a strong vision, which can provide a hopeful,

compelling alternative to what the world offers. If presented well, the facets of biblical sex listed above can sound attractive—namely, a mutual consent that is much deeper and fulfilling than society's, the avoidance of fracturing ourselves with our attempts at self-gratification, and a bridging of the divide between men and women that brings both genders' strengths to the table.

JUSTICE AND SEX ARE PART OF THE SAME CLOTH

Here is one more way to present the biblical sex ethic to modern audiences—particularly Western ones concerned with the notion of justice. Justice may not be the first thing that comes to mind when we think of sexuality, but the Bible actually weaves these two concepts closely together. We know that the early church sought justice by concerning itself with the poor and seeking racial equality (Galatians 2:10, 3:28). At the same time, it taught that sex was only meant for a mutually self-giving, lifelong covenant of marriage (1 Thessalonians 4:3–8; 1 Corinthians 6:12–20). To our modern ears, these two ideas sound like a clash of liberal and conservative views. But the Christian understandings of sex and justice are part of the same cloth. In the same way, sexual immorality and injustice go hand in hand (Amos 2:7)—there is a unifying principle that ties them together.

Justice takes sacrifice. Philippians 2:6–8 tells us that Jesus gave up the idea of achieving equality with God and sacrificed his status and power to save us. This is the basis for biblical justice. To help those who need it requires sacrifice, whether it's our time, comfort, finances, or social status. On the other hand, if we are one of the marginalized, it requires self-sacrifice to forgive and reconcile, even as we seek justice and speak truth in love.

Western culture's conceit is that people define their own identity rather than finding it in relationships with God, family, and community. This makes sex a self-affirming commodity in relationships conducted contingently on a profitable, cost-benefit relationship. But using sex this way is an injustice not only to ourselves, but also to anyone else who takes part in it. It objectifies the other and prioritizes our desires over their wellbeing and betterment. It removes any attempts at bonding from an act explicitly made for it, leaving the other feeling emotionally and spiritually unfulfilled. If we are committed to ensuring justice for others, taking part in noncommittal sex that sees others as products to be discarded whenever we want is hardly the way to do it.

The Christian sex ethic, on the other hand, is founded on the same sacrificial spirit that justice is. Take, for example, the notion of consent. Historically, Christians were the first group to advocate for the idea of consent in sex, and the same is true today. As was mentioned earlier, Christians espouse the highest, most complete form of consent in marriage. Even within marriage, sex must be mutually consensual (1 Corinthians 7:1–4). This fuller vision of consent is the only way to protect all parties—especially those with less power—from the damaging consequences of misused sex. To say, "I want to give you my whole life" values the other person far more than to say, "I want to give you my body temporarily but to hold on to my independence." Marriage entails mutual self-sacrifice, the permanent giving up of independence for the deeper joy of interdependence.

This is why the Bible and the church have always seen sexual ethics and doing justice as one cloth united by the principle of self-sacrifice; we lose ourselves to find ourselves rather than finding ourselves by getting everything we think we want—and hurting others in the process.

DISCUSSIONS ABOUT HOMOSEXUALITY

While much of the preceding material addresses Western culture's view of sex in general, there will inevitably be times when Christians must specifically address the issue of homosexuality. Because of how strongly this culture defends non-heterosexual expression, such conversations can perhaps seem like the most daunting of all to undertake. Nevertheless, they are not impossible. As with conversations about anything else, the gospel provides us with instruction on how to love others even while advocating its truth. Here are three thoughts on conveying the Christian view of homosexuality *in public*.

Loving our neighbors. First of all, Christians have no excuse for treating gay individuals harshly or scornfully. In the past, many Christians and churches have been abusive to gay men and women, but we are called to sacrificially seek our neighbors' good, even if they don't believe the same things as us—and that includes gay neighbors. Christians who abuse these individuals are not truly following the teachings of Jesus, a man who died for those opposing him.

Clarifying the evaluation of Christianity. When entering conversations about homosexuality, we may be presented with the sentiment, "I can't be a Christian because I don't agree with the offensive things that the Bible says about homosexuality." But challenge them by acknowledging that this is the wrong order in which to receive the teachings of Christianity. Are they saying that Christianity cannot be true simply because they find it offensive? Aren't there a number of things that are unpleasant but still true? Are they saying that because they disagree with biblical teaching on sex, that Jesus *couldn't* have been raised from the dead? Christianity as a whole stands or falls on whether Jesus is the Son of God who rose from the grave. If he *isn't* the Son of God, who cares what the Bible says? If he is, then there's a lot in the Bible we must then process. We must all come to terms with the evidence for Christianity rather than simply saying, "I don't want it to be true." There is no intellectual integrity in that.

Escaping cultural captivity. Western culture's view of homosexuality is derived from a particular understanding of how identity is formed. In this environment, we are told we must discover our deepest desires and then express them in order to become our authentic selves. But this is an individualistic view of identity—and not a realistic one. The reality is that we have contradictory impulses in our heart and need some moral standard to help us determine which ones should be cultivated and which ones should not.

Ancient people and modern people alike let their cultures set the standards (see the illustration of the Anglo-Saxon warrior later in this paper), and therefore we all form an identity that mirrors our society. In comparison, Christianity says *not* to let our tribe or culture control us and decide how valuable we are. Instead, we allow God's Word to give us a comprehensive, illuminating

framework with which we truly understand our heart. We let God's love and grace, through Jesus Christ, give us our deepest validation and identity—one much more hopeful, meaningful, and everlasting than any given by the world. Pointing out how our culture commands us to form identity and how God would have us do it instead can be helpful in discussions about sexuality.

BIBLICAL EXAMINATIONS OF HOMOSEXUALITY

The vast majority of people who have read the Bible—both those who disagree with its teaching and those who accept it—believe it clearly forbids homosexual activity. This is not just the consensus of readers outside of the academic field but also that of the great majority of historical scholars, both secular and religious. Nevertheless, we must never assume that those with whom we discuss homosexuality have a comprehensive background in biblical teaching on the issue—let alone that they agree with it. Today, some Christians are even tempted to jettison the Bible's teaching on homosexuality and retain other parts of it. If we find ourselves in situations where it is prudent (or perhaps even asked of us) to present specific biblical passages that teach on homosexuality, we can recall those in the following list.

Genesis 1–3. The opening chapters of the Bible state that everything God created was perfectly good, and this includes both sexuality and gender (1:27–28). Male and female were brought together by God in the first wedding (Genesis 2:24), and each was qualified to be the spouse of the other because they were literally "like-opposite"—complementary to one another (2:18). They are both similar *and* different; therefore, the union of their differences not only solves the problem of being "alone" (2:18), but it can also create life and nurture it (1:27–28, 2:24). Jesus later quotes Genesis in Mark 10:6–7 to say that sexual difference is a requirement for marriage: "At the beginning of creation God 'made them male and female.' 'For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife.'" Marriage is designed for two people of different, not the same, gender.

Genesis 3, however, shows us that the influence of sin has caused all good things to become marred and all human desires to become distorted, including our sexual desires and the relationship between our genders (3:7). To mitigate the effects of sin, the Bible has many commands directing people toward God's design for sex. It is to be a unitive, bonding act within a lifelong covenant of marriage, and it is to unite the two genders and their differences.

Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13. Both of these verses forbid sex between two people of the same gender; 20:13 says that if this happens "both of them have done what is detestable." This is a prohibition of mutual, consensual sex, as Old Testament law elsewhere specifies that victims of rape are not condemned (Deuteronomy 22:23–27). While it is true that the Levitical laws pertaining to the sacrificial system and ceremonial purity were fulfilled by Christ and are not practiced by Christians anymore (Mark 7:19), the laws against theft, lying, oppressing our neighbors, and showing partiality in court—as well as those against sexual immorality—all still bind the Christian conscience and our behavior. During the centuries before and after Christ's time on

earth, all thinkers and teachers within Judaism unanimously understood Leviticus as instruction that prohibits any kind of same-sex relations at all. There is no reason to believe (or any indication that) Jesus and Paul would have held any other view, nor that Jesus' fulfillment of the laws of sacrifice and purity changed the inherent morality of the rest of the laws about what Christians should or should not do.

Romans 1:25–27. This passage is so important that it is worth quoting in full here:

> They exchanged the truth about God for a lie, and worshiped and served created things rather than the Creator—who is forever praised. Amen.
>
> Because of this, God gave them over to shameful lusts. Even their women exchanged natural sexual relations for unnatural ones. In the same way the men also abandoned natural relations with women and were inflamed with lust for one another. Men committed shameful acts with other men, and received in themselves the due penalty for their error.

Paul's description of this event tells us that human beings should seek to love and worship the Creator, but instead we love and worship created things. Put another way, we should turn to God, the Different; but instead we turn toward the same—other created things—and worship them. The next two verses show us that, in the same way, human beings in sexual love should turn to the different, to the other gender—but some instead turn toward the same. Through this parallel, Paul can liken same-sex relationships to idolatry. (Verses 29–31 go on to condemn other sins that flow out of humanity's propensity for idolatry. Homosexuality is not alone nor singled out as the worst.)

Notice again the description of mutual, consensual relations throughout the passage. Both partners have "lust for one another" (verse 27). Are same-sex relationships prohibited only when they are marked by excessive lust instead of committed, romantic love? No. There is no mention of excessive lust in the female-to-female relationships mentioned in verse 26 (nor in numerous other descriptions of homosexuality throughout the Bible). In other words, all same-sex relationships are forbidden, regardless of whether they are mutual, loving ones or not.

1 Corinthians 6:9–11 and 1 Timothy 1:9–10. 1 Corinthians 6:9–11 gives us a list of things we cannot persist in doing if we claim to be part of God's kingdom. Homosexual activity is only one of the sins identified, but it is clearly named. 1 Timothy 1:9–10 gives us a similar list and, as in 1 Corinthians 6, the Greek word *arsenokoites* (referring to men having sex with men) is used. This is the same word used in the Greek translation of Leviticus 20:13 to describe homosexuality and, as stated earlier, there is abundant testimony that Jews universally understood the words used in Leviticus to prohibit all forms of same-sex relationships.

After prohibiting homosexual behavior, 1 Corinthians 6 goes on to read, "And that is what some of you were. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the

Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God" (verse 11). It is clear here that, while there have always been Christians who have been attracted to the same sex, their most fundamental identity does not rest in their sexual desires. Instead, it resides in their unification with Christ by the Holy Spirit and being brought into the family of God.

Revelation 21–22. Just as the Bible begins with a marriage union of the different, it also ends with such a marriage. The imagery of Revelation, of course, is dizzying and multi-dimensional. After all, it states not only that the church will be married to Jesus (21:2), but that the church is the bride, and the Groom is the Lamb! Nevertheless, the imagery is clear—history does not end with the union of two husbands or two wives but a husband and wife. Why? Because the glorious miracle of God's grace means that even though we are radically different from him, we are united with him. Thus, even the best marriages of men and women on earth are only soft echoes of the ultimate union of love, joy, and glory that we have in Christ.

What about Jesus? Despite the claim that Jesus never spoke about homosexuality, he specifically forbids *porneia* in Matthew 5 and 19. The word, which means "sexual immorality," was defined by Jews as a concept that encompassed all of the sexual prohibitions of Leviticus 18. As a first-century Jew himself and an avid student of Scripture, Jesus' definition of sexual immorality would have certainly been the same. When Jesus forbids *porneia*, he is assuredly prohibiting homosexuality, as well. Recall, also, his quotation of God's creation of male and female and their union in Mark 10:6–7.

THE BIBLE IN CHURCH HISTORY

It is important to recognize a remarkable fact about the list of biblical examples just given. On a great number of issues, the Christian church has not been unanimous in how it has read the Bible. It has not agreed on the role of women. Some churches do not ordain women, while others such as the Wesleyans, Pentecostals, Salvation Army, and some African American churches have ordained them for centuries. Likewise, churches did not agree on slavery. While some supported various forms of slavery, there was always strong opposition from other quarters of the church. Churches have not agreed on the exact particularities of Genesis 1 and how God brought about human life on the planet. Indeed, the church has not even agreed on some of the crucial doctrines such as justification by faith alone—as illustrated by the great divide between the Protestant and Catholic churches.

And yet (until very recently) there has been overwhelming unanimity and agreement of churches and Christian theologians and thinkers in every century, in every culture, across all branches—Orthodox, Catholic, and Protestant—that the Bible forbids homosexuality and same-sex relationships. To overturn the way the entire church has always understood the Bible's teaching on the significant topic of homosexuality would truly be unprecedented. It would also mark a major break with the universal church of the past. If someone truly does think that *every*

Christian teacher and theologian in *every* culture and *every* century has been wrong about this, their evidence must be overwhelmingly strong. However, it is not.[11]

SEXUAL APOLOGETICS: PASTORAL APPROACHES TO COMMON QUESTIONS REGARDING HOMOSEXUALITY

When having discussions with those who identify as homosexual (or those advocating for them on their behalf), there are a few recurring statements that may be helpful to identify and prepare a response to. The first is this:

"If you don't accept my homosexuality, then you are rejecting me as a person. You aren't letting me be myself."

Because Western culture ties sexuality and identity so closely together, this may seem true. But ask them to consider this: what if a Muslim friend approached them and said, "You can't be my friend unless you accept my Muslim beliefs about God, morality, and how human beings should live. If you reject my deepest feelings and beliefs about how we should live, then you are rejecting me." What would they say?

They would probably say something like this: "How would you like it if I said the same to you—that you have to accept all of my deepest feelings and beliefs or you are rejecting me? I can't accept all your feelings and beliefs, but that doesn't mean I'm rejecting you as a person. Let's try to be friends!"

If they wouldn't accept a Muslim friend making that demand of them, then they shouldn't make that demand of us. They have not only feelings but beliefs about those feelings, and we don't have to agree with them all (nor do they have to agree with all of ours) for us to be friends.

A response to this sentiment may come along the lines of, "But being gay is not a matter of different beliefs. This is simply who I am."

In greater detail, this sub-narrative is saying something like, "My behavior and my views are part of my identity. Therefore, if you criticize my behavior or counter my views, you aren't letting me be myself. Not letting me be myself is intolerant, creates an unsafe environment, and leads to suicide and hate. Your views and your behavior are subject to criticism, but mine are not because they are inborn."

In response to this, it may be prudent to point out that this idea—that our identity is based simply on expressing inward feelings without the imposition of "external" moral beliefs—is an illusion. A popular exponent of this view was Gail Sheehy. In her 1976 book *Passages*, she insists that we can only become ourselves when we look inside our hearts and express ourselves apart from any "external valuations and accreditations."[12] But this is patently impossible.

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[11] To read more about the Bible's stance on homosexuality, I encourage you to read the following resources: Allberry, *Is God Anti-Gay?*; Shaw, *The Plausibility Problem*; and Kevin DeYoung, *What Does the Bible Really Teach About Homosexuality?* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2015).

[12] Gail Sheehy, *Passages: Predictable Crises of Adult Life* (New York: Random House, 2006), 354.

Imagine this: an Anglo-Saxon warrior goes about his life in AD 800 Britain. He knows he has two inner impulses and feelings that are very strong. One is aggression: he loves to smash and kill people whenever they show him disrespect. Because he lives in a culture with warrior-like ethics and an emphasis on honor and shame, he will easily identify with the feeling of committing violence against anyone who insults him. It would be effortless for him to say, "That's me! That's who I am! I'm going to express that." Now say the other feeling he senses is an attraction to other men. Because no one else around him thinks this is an appropriate feeling to have, he will address this feeling by saying, "That's not me. I'm going to suppress that impulse and control it."

Now imagine a young man walking around Manhattan today. He has the same two inward impulses—a desire to be violent against those who disrespect him and a desire to have sex with other men—both equally strong, both difficult to control. In twenty-first-century New York City, what is he going to do? He will examine his inner desire for aggression and will say, "This is not who I want to be," and he will seek deliverance from it in therapy and anger management programs. He will look at his sexual desire, however, and conclude, "That is who I am." Why? Because the overwhelming majority of New Yorkers will tolerate—even celebrate—someone expressing their sexual desires. This majority will, however, take umbrage with someone expressing their aggression by brutalizing someone whenever they are insulted on the subway.

This thought experiment shows that we do *not* primarily receive our identity from our internal feelings. Rather, we take some interpretive moral grid given to us by our culture, lay it over our various impulses, and use it to sift through our desires. This grid helps us decide which feelings are "us" and should be expressed and which are not and should not be revealed and acted upon. This set of interpretive beliefs is what forms our identity rather than an innate, unadulterated expression of our feelings.

Despite protests to the contrary, we instinctively know that our inner depths are insufficient to guide us. We need standards or rules from outside of us to help us discern the warring impulses of our interior life. The openly gay New Yorker who says, "I'm just being myself" is no freer than the Anglo-Saxon warrior. They have both formed their identity not based on some inner, true self, but based on what society tells them is acceptable.

Christianity offers an alternative. It acknowledges that we must have outside help to receive identity. It acknowledges that, as we form an identity, we desire the approval of people we love and respect. As one character in Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* reflects, "The praise of the praiseworthy is above all rewards."[13] People both ancient and modern rightly look for the validation of the praiseworthy. But we must be mindful of who the praiseworthy truly are. We mustn't let the ever-changing whims of culture determine who we are. We mustn't let those whims control us simply because we seek validation from them. Instead, we should let the one who is *most* praiseworthy—our God who is unchanging—help us. We must let him give us the original moral grid that was formed long before any others and still exists today. It is a framework that helps us

[13] J. R. R. Tolkien, *The Two Towers* (New York: HarperCollins, 1997), 667.

understand our heart in a deeper and fuller way than any temporary solutions our cultures offer. By studying this framework in God's Word and accepting God's love and grace through Jesus Christ's sacrifice for us, we receive the deepest validation and identity we could ever get.

Even still, we might receive a rebuttal like this: "But being gay isn't a choice. I was born gay."

We can grant that sexual attractions are not always chosen and can feel deeply natural. This may mean agreeing that some who express homosexual desires do not do so because of a lifestyle choice or as a response to their environment.

But we should push back on the simplistic and reductionistic attitude that can arise as a result of this. Few people believe that a genetic predisposition toward any behavior predestines the way we live our lives. An innate propensity for addiction, anger, or shyness cannot totally determine how we feel and behave throughout life. Instead, we are highly complex products of genetics and biology, our pre-conscious environment, our early childhood, our relationships with our parents and siblings, our culture, our friendships, our personal choices, and our responses to all of the above. For some, same-sex attraction may be like their first acquisition of language. Someone who grows up speaking Chinese doesn't feel as if they chose to speak Chinese at all. It was instilled in them because people spoke the language to them, and they were wired to speak it back. They did not decide to speak Chinese, but neither do they speak Chinese because they were genetically "born that way."

This response subverts the dominant narrative that homosexuality is genetically determined (which is not scientifically proven), but it also affirms an individual's actual experience. It also means, if the person eventually embraces Christianity, we can later return to the language metaphor and explain that, while the first language will always feel the most natural, we do have the ability to learn a new language.

"Learning the language" of Christianity undeniably means choosing not to act on homosexual desires. This gives individuals who experience such desires the options of pursuing a heterosexual marriage or remaining celibate. To modern ears, these alternatives sound restrictive and punishing. Some will say, "If I'm gay and become a Christian, I'll be conflicted and miserable."

While the biblical view of homosexuality makes sense, and is even liberating when viewed from within a joyful belief in the gospel, we must admit that it can be hard to imagine its legitimacy—let alone joy—from an outside perspective. A parent's warning of "Be home before 10:00 p.m." can seem cruel and senseless if the child fails to see the bigger picture of reality within which the rule makes perfect sense. Our culture teaches us that the meaning of life is to live for our own individual happiness—particularly that which is discovered in sexual fulfillment—and from within that worldview, biblical prohibitions on homosexuality seem harsh.

But Jesus saved us by renouncing his freedom and comfort so that he could live and die for us. When we receive our salvation as a gift of free grace, we learn that the deepest joy is found in living in the same way he did. We renounce many things because God calls us to do so—all so that we can love him and others and find our true satisfaction. At first, God's will in Scripture seems to frustrate *many* of our deepest longings—certainly not just our sexual ones. But if we are

faithful to his Word, we will ultimately find that each divine demand is really a summons into a transformative process in which we discover deeper levels of peace, joy, and fulfillment in God and Christian love than we could have otherwise known.

Even as it discusses sexuality, the Bible says that we "are not [our] own; [we] were bought at a price" (1 Corinthians 6:19–20), and that "price" is the costly, sacrificial love of Jesus. This underscores that not only our sexuality but *all* that we are belongs to God, not ourselves. It also shows us that God's plans for us are motivated by love—infinite love. His plans for our whole lives, including our bodies, are not defined by simple bigotry. They are meant for our salvation, our betterment, and our growing closer to God and his kingdom. Therefore, they are higher and more wonderful than anything of which we can conceive. When we take this into account, it only makes sense to embrace his loving rule over us.

Many Christians who experience same-sex attraction have said something along the lines of, "I am attracted to people of the same sex, but I accept what God says in his Word. And though I don't know *how* God will do it, I believe he will use this to bless me—to make me wiser, deeper, and happier." Regardless of whether we are homosexual or not, when we locate our deepest identity and value in Christ rather than in sexual expression, and if we do not continue to feed the longing through fantasies, intense sexual desires can become much less controlling and overwhelming over time. This is not because we have been conditioned to forget who we are—it is because our happiness is no longer dependent on whether we have a sexual relationship. To find one's deepest identity in Christ rather than in sexuality or anything else is to no longer be dominated by anything (1 Corinthians 6:12) and to be empowered to live through all of life's circumstances with more freedom and strength than ever before.

ADDITIONAL READING RECOMMENDED BY CITY TO CITY

Hill, Wesley. *Washed and Waiting: Reflections on Christian Faithfulness and Homosexuality*. Enlarged edition. Zondervan, 2016.

Jones, Beth Felker. *Faithful: A Theology of Sex*. Zondervan, 2015.

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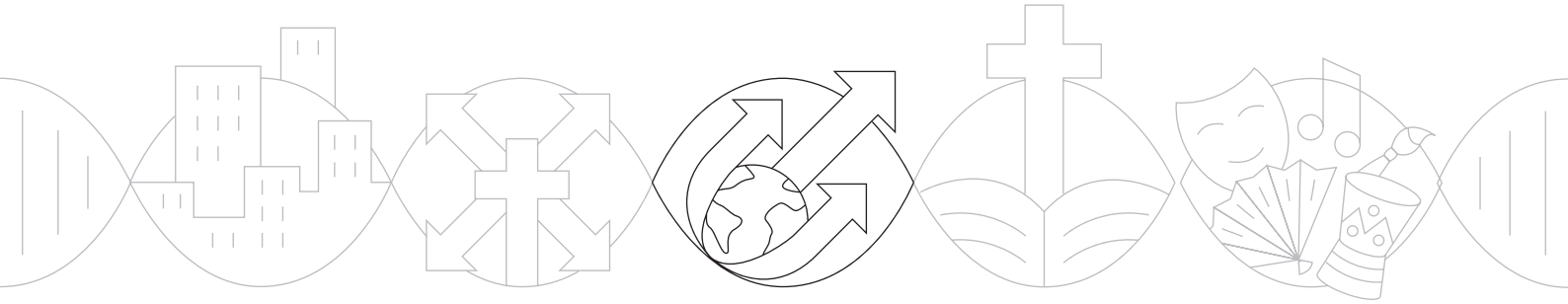
Treweek, Danielle. *The Meaning of Singleness: Retrieving an Eschatological Vision for the Contemporary Church*. IVP, 2023.

Yarhouse, Mark, and Julia Sadusky. *Emerging Gender Identities: Understanding the Diverse Experiences of Today's Youth*. Brazos Press, 2020.



Movement

Because it takes a unified, collaborative church to reach the city, we:

- *Honor and empower local leadership and decision making.*
- *Support churches, organizations, and institutions with a vision for citywide gospel movement.*
- *Collaborate and fellowship with leaders from a wide variety of denominational and cultural backgrounds and with a diversity of spiritual giftings and leadership styles.*

PART SEVENTEEN

Church Planting

Nothing is more fundamental to City to City than planting churches. We are an organization driven by DNA derived from the gospel, one implemented by leaders rather than programs. We emphasize contextualization and innovation rather than alignment with a singular, detailed model for church planting that is reproduced around the world regardless of context. We have therefore been reluctant to publish a detailed set of steps or a specific process for planting a church.

However, this can result in providing too many high-level principles and too few applied, concrete proposals for how to actually establish a new church in a city. During the planning process, church planters need two things: plentiful practical models used successfully in various parts of the world and great freedom to adapt (or even reject) these proposals for their own context. This paper will focus on some of the most common approaches to church planting and give practical options. Note also that most of the models for church planting are from North America and Europe. Few have been published from Latin America, Africa, or Asia, and there is a need for more of these to be available in print or at least online. (The hope is that City to City's leaders around the globe can contribute to filling this need.)

WHAT IS A CHURCH?

Before we go on to explore church planting, it first makes sense to address how we define a church—at least in a general way. Is a church any gathering of Christians at all? If not, what makes it one? One of the issues City to City is currently addressing is the fact that our churches and leaders belong to many different denominations and traditions with historical differences in how they define a "true church" versus a "false" one. So, with careful consideration, we present the following ideas.

THE DEFINITION OF THE CHURCH

The Apostles' Creed describes the church as "the communion of saints." This phrase is widely understood to describe a body of converted, faith-professing disciples who have set themselves apart to live for Christ ("saints"), who share in common Christ himself and all his benefits and gifts, and who share their gifts and goods in order to serve and build up one another.[1] This is a helpful start in considering how a simple gathering of believers may not be a genuine church.

[1] See Heidelberg Catechism Q/A 54 and 55, http://www.heidelberg-catechism.com/en/lords-days/21.html.

Unless people are ready to commit themselves to one another beyond mere public meetings, they are not a "communion of saints."

THE PURPOSES OF THE CHURCH

Traditionally, the church is to offer goods and resources in service in three different ways.[2] After all, the root meaning of the word "ministry" means to serve!

Service to God: Worship. Ministry is primarily service to the covenant Lord. Service to the needs of others must be primarily motivated by a will to serve him. The controlling principle of service is therefore never the attractiveness or neediness of others but the calling of God. In a sense, absolutely everything the church does is part of its worship (Romans 12:1; Hebrews 13:16; 1 Corinthians 10:31), but the church is also specifically called to gather for corporate worship.

Service to God's people: Formation. We are to meet the needs of our brothers and sisters with the goal of building them up into the stature of Christ. Therefore, spiritual gifts are always given for the edification of the whole body, not for the individual. Thus, the purpose of ministry is the *oikodome* described in Ephesians 4:12–16: "so that the body of Christ may be built up" (verse 12). We are to form disciples in the church.

Service to and before the world: Witness. As Abraham was called into covenantal service to be a blessing to the nations, and as Israel was called to be a holy nation as a witness to the world, so Christian service to the Lord is always done to declare the glory of the Lord before the nations. Witness can be both in word (such as in traditional evangelism) and in deed (such as pursuing justice and mercy). (See Acts 2:42–47 and Matthew 5:16.)

The church is to sing God's praises (1 Peter 2:9–10). In worship, we sing his praises to him; in edification, we sing God's praises to each other (Ephesians 5:19); and in witness, we sing God's praises to the world.

THE MARKS OF THE CHURCH

True preaching and declaration of the Word of God. An authentic church is committed to biblically sound, doctrinally true teaching. If a church loses the biblical gospel to either overt legalism or liberal relativism, they are no longer a real church.

Right administration of baptism and the Lord's Supper. Preaching God's Word is the most important mark of a church, and yet it is possible to be a Christian gathering or ministry without functioning as a church congregation if people are not baptized into the faith and if the Lord's Supper is not observed together by calling people to eat it "worthily" (1 Corinthians 11:27). This

[2] Missiologist Alan Hirsch calls these the "marks of the church" (*The Forgotten Ways: Reactivating Apostolic Movements* [Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2016]), but in traditional Protestant theology, these are functions or goals for purposes of the church. They define what the church *does*, but do not fully circumscribe what a church is. For example, there are many parachurch ministries that do worship, discipling, and various kinds of witness, but they would never call themselves a church.

does *not* mean we earn the Lord's Supper through our goodness, but that we come to God in repentance and faith in the gospel. If we sin and refuse to repent, we should not partake.

Covenantal, mutual accountability for one's life and practice. Luther and Calvin agreed on the above two marks of a church.[3] Traditionally, Reformed churches have gone on to add a third mark, usually defined as "the practice of discipline for correcting faults."[4] However, it is fair to point out that the right use of the sacraments *entails* communal accountability for beliefs and behavior. To baptize someone, a church must have standards of belief. What must the person profess in order to be baptized? To call people to eat the Lord's Supper worthily, the church must have the right to define what those standards are and to call people to it.

Thus, we can either speak of three marks of the church or the two marks with an "enriched" second mark, but we must create churches in which texts such as Hebrews 13:17 make sense. It calls Christians to "have confidence in your leaders" for they "keep watch over you." A church that has no authority to hold people accountable for their faith and practice—a church that has no leaders to be obeyed—may not be a church at all (see Hebrews 3:13; James 5:16; 1 Corinthians 5:1–5, 13; 14:33, 40).

RATIONALE FOR CHURCH PLANTING

There are two primary rationales for church planting: we plant churches because the Bible calls us to participate in God's mission in this way and because it is one of the most effective ways to evangelize people. To examine these rationales, I find the work of Dutch theologian and author Stefan Paas helpful. I include Paas's material below because he takes a scholarly and skeptical approach to common views about church planting that evangelical church-planting networks have held for so long. In the end, his insights are basically confirmed with good refinements and by similar insights of others in his field.

PLANTING CHURCHES AS PARTICIPATION IN GOD'S MISSION

The "Pauline Cycle."[5] Paul's ministry of church planting as discerned in the book of Acts and some of his epistles is the biblical basis for church planting most often cited among modern ministry leaders. Paul did not merely make converts—he planted new congregations. We see through his example that after missionaries arrive and evangelism and conversion take place converts congregate and leaders are appointed (Acts 13:43, 14:23). After enough growth, the church sends out their own missionaries to evangelize and create new congregations. While there is no explicit

[3] See Article Seven of the Lutheran *Augsburg Confession*, Project Wittenberg, https://www.projectwittenberg.org/pub/resources/text/wittenberg/concord/web/augs-007.html; and Calvin's *Institutes* 4.1.9, http://www.vor.org/rbdisk/html/institutes/4_01.htm.

[4] See Article 29 of the *Belgic Confession*, Protestant Reformed Churches in America, http://www.prca.org/about/official-standards/creeds/three-forms-of-unity/belgic-confession/27-35/article-29.

[5] David F. Hesselgrave, *Planting Churches Cross-Culturally: North America and Beyond* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2000), 42–51.

command in the New Testament to make this normative for all mission, this pattern should have a great deal of influence on our own mission work. The Pauline cycle becomes even more applicable as societies move away from Christendom and become increasingly less Christian.

The distinction between planting the gospel and the church. 1 Corinthians 3:5–7 speaks of what we call church planting, and the language of "planting" is even used. However, a careful examination of this passage shows that Paul never directly says he planted a church. He "planted the seed" and Apollos "watered it," but through it all God was the one who made it grow. Paul says he sowed seed into a field (the people of Corinth) and God grew it (the conversions). While we must take care not to press metaphors too far, it seems the seed that was planted and watered was the message of the gospel. Only through the mysterious work of God, then, does a church grow out of our planting and watering the gospel.

In other words, "the church [is] the *result* of planting, rather than its object."[6] Paas makes this point in order to temper the modern (and American) overemphasis on technique. We often speak as if we are the ones who can bring about a new church through our programs. Modern church-planting literature nearly always includes evangelism, but in a remarkable number of these books, it constitutes a short chapter in a volume that puts far more emphasis on management techniques. The Bible's language is more nuanced. The Bible emphasizes the skillful and faithful ministering of the gospel, and, if he wills, God grows the church.

The distinction between faithfulness and fruitfulness. Paas rightly critiques the church growth movement by asking, "Is growth the [main] purpose of mission?"[7] If numerical growth is the main goal of mission, then evangelism is only a means to an end. If numerical growth is the goal, the implication is that our mission has failed, or is at least seriously incomplete, if we have not won virtually all the world to Christ. What if numerical growth is something we seek so we can continue to aim at our main goal: the multiplication of changed lives and Christ-centered communities of faith? Thus, numerical growth is the means, and evangelism and the creation of community are the ends.

Paul says in Romans 15:17–23 that he "fully proclaimed the gospel of Christ" (verse 19) in a particular part of Asia, and that there was therefore "no more place for [Paul to] work in [those] regions" (verse 23). Paas notes that if the main purpose of mission is numerical growth, Paul could not have claimed this. Quoting fellow theologian Lesslie Newbigin, Paas reasons that Paul could not have meant everyone in the region had been converted, or even that everyone had heard the gospel preached. It seems better to say that our goal is to plant the gospel in order to create a church that confesses Jesus as Lord, and we seek numerical growth as a means to that end.[8] These distinctions are fine ones, but they are much more than philosophical. We must watch our own hearts. Even if God is clearly working in our midst, we can become despondent if our numbers

[6] Stefan Paas, *Church Planting in the Secular West: Learning from the European Experience* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2016), 13.
[7] Ibid., 114.
[8] Ibid., 116.

are fairly small—or we easily become satisfied with merely drawing a crowd rather than seeing people truly transformed.

THE EVANGELISTIC EFFECTIVENESS OF NEW CHURCHES

The second main rationale for planting churches is that it is evangelistically effective. Paas notes that the standard claims about church planting are the following:

- Orthodox and evangelical churches reach people better than liberal and state churches.
- New churches reach more non-Christians than older churches.
- New churches reach new generations, people groups, and residents better than old churches.

Paas sets out to empirically test these claims in Europe under the assumption that if these theses hold true in a post-Christian environment with difficult soil for church planting, they are likely to be broadly true for the rest of the globe.[9]

Thesis 1: Conservative religion has an advantage over liberal religion. Paas repeatedly demonstrates that "sects" (churches that are stricter and more out-of-step with the values of the broader culture) grow better than churches. There are two reasons for this.

First, by emphasizing the difference between those inside and outside the church, they are able to limit "free riders." "Since they set high demands on membership," Paas writes, "these congregations have comparatively few members who … must be respected in decision-making but contribute little in return."[10] In other words, a far higher percentage of members are deeply committed, contribute significant time and money, make the church more effective in its ministries, form stronger mutual relationships, and are more unified in vision and spirit.

Second, because they *are* different from the world, these churches are able to present their distinctive culture as an asset that cannot be acquired anywhere else. No one will come to a church if they can get whatever it offers elsewhere without the effort of attendance and investment. "After all, people do not find it worthwhile to pay the costs of membership without getting anything in return that they don't possess already."[11] This is a major barrier to people attending liberal churches—if someone simply wants to pursue justice, for example, they don't need to get up early on Sundays to do so.

Though it may seem counterintuitive, stricter and more conservative religion will generally grow more effectively than its counterparts, and its institutions will be stronger than the religions that make their peace with the spirit of the age. (As mentioned in the previous DNA papers, these types of "sect" churches can tend toward issues that must be avoided, such as legalism, withdrawal from culture, and hostility toward non-Christians.)

[9] Ibid., 124–180.

[10] Ibid., 134.

[11] Ibid.

Thesis 2: New churches reach non-Christians and new groups better than old ones. Paas cites studies that show that new churches attract two to three times more newly migrated people to an area than older churches. Older churches present systems that are harder for newcomers to break into and can feel more closed off to outsiders. New churches are far easier for newcomers to enter and find acceptance. No one mentions, "You're new around here," because *everyone* is new. There are no worried statements from church members like, "We've never done things that way before," because new churches *haven't* done things before.

Paas shows that many of the claims of church growth from new congregations are anecdotal, impossible to verify, and exaggerations used for promotion. This is common among evangelical missions, unfortunately. Most new churches' attendees are Christians who switch over from other churches or returnees who stopped going to church but are drawn back. Nevertheless, there is evidence—even in Europe—that newer churches attract more new converts than older churches.

One useful study shows that new churches were four times as effective at seeing conversions as older churches, even without taking the most highly successful church plants into account. One movement of new churches Paas studied in the Netherlands showed that 20 percent of its members were "initiates," or new converts through the church.[12] That may be higher than usual—there isn't enough research to tell—but it is an encouraging statistic and is far higher than the number of conversions seen in older churches. Additionally, we see that churches planted in more difficult, slow-growing soil show a larger proportion of converts from a non-Christian background (though such churches are usually smaller and more gradual in growth) than faster growing churches in "easier" territory.[13]

In summary, new churches are significantly better at reaching new groups of non-Christians. Smaller churches in more resistant soil may be even more evangelistic than ones that grow larger in places where there are more Christians.

However, Paas argues against the belief that new churches are automatically more evangelistic. It is, perhaps, an American tendency to look for a "magic bullet" technique that cannot fail. Scores of books give the impression that it is the newness of a congregation that creates this evangelistic effectiveness. But Paas offers a study of a denomination which found that, in any given country, the denomination's newer congregations were not growing as well as its older churches. There is nothing inherently, magically evangelistic in newness. Instead, Paas argues that the following factors cause evangelistic effectiveness to be more present in newer churches than older ones, but they are not necessarily inherently present:

- **Location:** Churches grow best where there are population changes—where there are new people groups or immigrants, or where there is high turnover among moving residents. "Generally, churches are planted in areas with population growth while older churches are more often located in areas with stable populations [people set in their life patterns,

[12] Ibid.

[13] Ibid., 179.

less open to change,] or declining populations."[14] And, of course, new churches can and do give much more attention to location than older churches.

- **Missionary focus:** "Pastors in newer churches experience more missionary expectations in their congregations, they are setting explicit missionary goals, and they are prepared to make sacrifices to reach out to their community. In other words, they work harder in terms of evangelism and social action."[15] The ministers and leaders of older and larger churches are necessarily more absorbed—even exclusively so—with the needs of members. Church planters are understandably much more concerned about reaching new people.
- **Leadership:** "Church planters are much more entrepreneurial than pastors of older churches."[16] They tend to be more hopeful and confident in missionary outreach. They also tend to be more innovative and sensitive to new opportunities.

These three factors are much more conducive for evangelistic effectiveness than newness in and of itself. Paas concludes that the reason research shows newer and smaller congregations to be more evangelistic is because older and larger congregations are less perceptive of their environments and give far less attention and energy to outreach.

PROFILE OF A CHURCH PLANTER

What about the church planter personally? What sort of person should someone be in order to start a new congregation effectively? What sort of experience, temperament, and relationship with God should they have, for example?

Church planters and authors Craig Ott and Gene Wilson speak of three basic kinds of planters:[17]

1. **Pastoral church planters** plant the church and then stay to lead it.[18] This can also be the case for a church planted by a team that stays and leads the church as it grows with APEST gifts.[19] This works best in more affluent cultures where the congregation can support full-time ordained ministers once initial financial support from outsiders is concluded. Depending on the society, affluent cultures constitute anywhere from a small minority of the population to up to 33 percent of the population. This is the sole model many denominations use.

[14] Ibid., 175.

[15] Ibid., 175–176.

[16] Ibid., 176.

[17] Gene Wilson and Craig Ott, *Global Church Planting: Biblical Principles and Best Practices for Multiplication* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2010).

[18] In cross-cultural situations, the missionaries pastor until national or indigenous leaders are called to take their place.

[19] For more information on APEST gifts, see the next DNA paper on movements.

2. **Catalytic church planters** plant a church that then becomes a catalyst that mothers other churches. The catalytic planter or catalytic planting team then moves on to one of the daughter churches. This model may work best in less affluent fields but is also dependent on the gifting of the church planter or team members. Catalytic church planting is highly entrepreneurial and works well in fluid, start-up situations, though not as well in more settled, institutional settings.
3. **Apostolic church planters** serve as visionaries, mentors, equippers, and trainers. Sometimes, the apostolic church planter plants a hub church and then stays as resident there while others do the lion's share of ministry in the hub church. This frees the apostolic leader to be a "circuit rider," raising up new planters and planter teams, providing close supervision and on-the-job training. Sometimes, the apostolic church planter constantly moves to new locations and helps form new "hubs" but never serves as the up-front, visible minister for any church. Theoretically, this apostolic model could work in any setting, but this often works well in less affluent settings where ministers are bi-vocational and receive lots of input from the apostolic leader or apostolic team. This model is far less expensive than the above models. If the pastor's church grows enough, the bi-vocational pastor can transition to holding a full-time position.

TRAITS OF AN EFFECTIVE CHURCH PLANTER

Before we examine some useful traits in church planters, it is important to note two key points. First, 1 Corinthians 13 reminds us that talents and gifts are useless or even harmful if they are not accompanied by strong growth in spiritual maturity and Christian love. Theological depth and Christlike character should always be primary facets of a church planter. Nevertheless, many people of wonderful Christian character are simply not equipped or gifted to plant a church. This balance—the primacy of character yet the necessity of certain gifts—must be evident when assessing church planters.

Another crucial principle in assessing a church planter is that their qualities and credentials must fit the church-planting model that is being utilized. Some planters have failed, not because they couldn't plant a church but because their gifts did not fit the kind of church the situation required. No one person can have all the gifts needed to plant a church. A church planter leading a house church model may not need the public teaching skills that another model requires.

Nevertheless, many churches *are* planted by a solo leader for a variety of institutional and financial reasons. Even most church-planting teams have an identified, main leader who is most visible to the emerging congregation. Thus, it is still right to detail an overall profile of a church planter, which can be broken down into four levels.

LEVEL 1: BASICS OF CHRISTIAN MATURITY (COLOSSIANS 3, EPHESIANS 4, GALATIANS 5)

At the first level, the candidate should be a mature Christian. This is necessary but not sufficient; as stated before, even the godliest person may not be cut out for the job. But every planter should maintain the following.

- **Self-management disciplines:** The planter gets work done on time, is not controlled by outside circumstances, keeps commitments, and remains consistent and honest.
- **Interpersonal disciplines:** The planter is sensitive to others, gentle when confronting, a good listener, teachable, patient, and not controlling.
- **Gospel disciplines:** The planter is gracious, not irritable; repentant, not defensive; and grateful and joyous, not despondent or self-pitying.
- **Knowledge disciplines:** The planter is knowledgeable in the Bible, as well as theological topics and Christian living.
- **Spiritual disciplines:** The planter is consistent in prayer and studying Scripture, handles temptation well, has no unreconciled relationships within the church, and retains a good reputation with those inside and outside the church.

LEVEL 2: BASICS OF BEING A PASTOR

At the second level, the candidate must maintain the basics of being a pastor anywhere. This, again, is necessary but not sufficient. There are plenty of great pastors who would be ineffective church planters. Pastors should possess:

- **Basic grace:** They should understand the gospel and apply it to their heart so as not to become too self-effacing or too self-aggrandizing. Pastors must remain bold, humble, and aware of their strengths and weaknesses. Ministers also should not need constant affirmation and approval. Instead of possessing a fragile self-image, they should be able to take criticism well, using the means of grace and formative practices diligently and skillfully to spiritually grow and mature. Essentially, they should identify personal weaknesses but should not display chronic, overt character flaws.
- **Basic theology:** Pastors must be doctrinally balanced between legalism and liberalism. They should also be ecclesiologically balanced in aspects of evangelism, worship, discipleship, fellowship, and social concern.
- **Basic gifts:** Preaching is an important skill. Ministers must be able to teach the Bible even if they are not gifted in public speaking. A second basic gift is leading by being personally organized. Third, they should be godly enough to inspire people to follow. Fourth, they should possess the skill to form and maintain relationships. If leaders are godly enough, a lack of gifts in one of these particular areas will not make them inadequate. No one is equally gifted in all four.

LEVEL 3A: THE TRAITS OF A CHURCH PLANTER

At the third level, the planter must have basic traits for being a church-planting pastor. Here are suggested prerequisites to planting a church anywhere:

- **A successful record of ministry initiation:** The planter should demonstrate the ability to start ministries from scratch, such as youth programs, small groups, or campus ministries.
- **Family commitment:** Church-planting pastors always need the full support and commitment of their spouse and family. It is fair to say that the spouse must also sense a call to the church plant. Some spouses are ministry partners in the most literal and practical sense, taking on staff roles within the new church, but this must not be required of all spouses. Regardless, every spouse must agree with and take part in the vision that the whole family is planting a church together.
- **Accordance with the sending body:** The candidate should fit the doctrine and DNA of the mother church or organization planting the church. They should also fit the type of church the sponsoring group envisioned creating.

Beyond these three considerations, here are suggested requisites to being a church planter:

- **Planters should be entrepreneurial in their personality and gifts:** This includes being:
  - *A vision-caster:* Planters need to be able to visualize a specific future and describe it compellingly to others.
  - *A self-starter:* Unusually productive, self-starters are intrinsically motivated rather than requiring intense supervision and cushy incentives to get the work done. Conscientiousness, which is defined as a concern with order and willingness to work hard, is an element of this trait.
  - *A team builder who is also independent:* This type of leader empowers others rather than controlling them. They also feel confident in acting independently when needed rather than always working alone or always relying on others. They may not feel a strong emotional need to be on a team, yet they can form one and work on one. A successful planter creates a sense of ownership in others, instituting that it is "our" ministry rather than just the church planter's, and gives strong direction while allowing others to see their fingerprints, or contributions, all over the ministry.
  - *Relational:* If the planter is not an extrovert, they should at least be able to muster a high capacity for meeting new people warmly and making them feel welcome. They need to be good at staying in touch rather than being inaccessible.
  - *Persistent:* It is advantageous to be unusually resilient after disappointments and failures, as opposed to responding with anxiety, irritability, and discouragement.
  - *Flexible:* Planters must have the capacity to be organizationally adaptable when things don't go as planned, as well as resourceful in finding alternate routes to success.

  - *Innovative and creative:* The planter is not too reliant on rules and procedures and not overly traditional in temperament.
- **Planters should be good preachers and skilled at speaking in front of people:** This means not just being a good speaker, but a better-than-average one. In church planting, first impressions are crucial; listeners often won't give the church a second chance. Some traits of a good speaker (besides, of course, being biblical, theologically sound, and Christ-centered) include being clear and interesting; engaging listeners' imaginations; being contextual and practical by preaching material relevant to listeners' lives; and combining warmth and force in preaching from the heart.
- **Planters should be evangelistic:** Along with being able to preach to Christians and non-Christians alike, they should be evangelistically active in personal relationships and show some fruitfulness in these efforts.
- **Planters should feel called to reach a particular people group:** They should be adaptive as they try to engage this group, and should care for and love their community and the people in it. They should also humbly respect the people group. Sympathy is not enough; planters should admire many of the traits of the people in the community and expect to learn from their common grace.
- **Planters should be sympathetic to the group:** Along with a loving desire for people's conversion, they should hold deep sympathy for their fears, concerns, and difficulties. Planters should maintain a solid understanding of what makes those in their community "tick"—what their hopes, aspirations, needs, and motivations are. It also helps to know quite a bit about the issues of their daily lives.
- **Planters should have chemistry with the group:** Ideally, they should also have a track record of effective communication with them.

LEVEL 3B: THE TRAITS OF AN URBAN CHURCH PLANTER

When it comes to urban church planting specifically, these are the suggested prerequisites for planters:

- **Experience in urban living:** Preferably, the planter and their family members have experienced at least two years of living in a city and are acclimated to living in an urban environment.
- **Appreciation and love for urban life:** Pity for the city is not enough. The city should energize the planter, not just drain them. However, this is not the same thing as romanticizing the city, as everyone needs to leave cities to find restoration from time to time.
- **An understanding of urban sensibilities:** Like all cultural differences, this is hard to quantify and describe. It's better for someone to experience the characteristics of the city for themselves rather than be told about them. Note that these urban sensibilities include things like an appreciation for excellence without being overly slick, a lack of

sentimentality, a higher tolerance for ambiguity and disorder, and a lower tolerance for cultural insensitivity.

- **Acute sensitivity to racial and cultural differences:** Urban church planters should possess a willingness to learn and be highly sensitive to the particular viewpoints and sensibilities of different racial, national, and cultural groups. The ability to work with different ethnic groups and build multiethnic teams is a must.
- **Ability to relate to secular people:** Planters will come across people in urban settings without traditional moral values or a background of attending church. They will encounter postmodern and even "post-Christian" people that they must relate to, befriend, and evangelize. It is also important for the planter to be able to interface well with individuals who experience same-sex attraction.

LEVEL 4: THE TRAITS OF A TRANSFORMATIONAL CHURCH PLANTER

At the fourth level, the leader *may* have some traits that are associated with what could be called transformational pastoring, which can be defined by the qualities below. These qualities are not mandatory, but the potential presence of them should not be ignored in planning and supervising a plant.

- **Strong preaching skills:** Sometimes a church planter is so exceptional as a leader that their preaching can stand to be more average. However, transformational church planters are ordinarily exceptionally talented preachers.
- **Transformational leadership:** There are three basic components of leadership.
  - *Catalyzing:* Casting vision and setting goals.
  - *Organizing:* Strategizing how to accomplish goals; recruiting people and assigning them to the right roles; and setting up programs.
  - *Operating:* Supervising and evaluating; keeping people satisfied and cared for as they work; and dealing with problems and conflicts.

A strong leader recognizes all three of these components and makes sure they are all done well. The strong leader may be so versatile that they can accomplish all of these by themselves to some degree, or, more likely, they are extremely wise in knowing what they can and can't do and so create a team to cover the bases they cannot.

This is a leader who is not just strong, but who can also make major changes in the way they lead as the church experiences various stages of growth. In churches of 100, 300, 500, and 800 members, the leadership roles vary and are distinct. Many strong leaders can't make changes and adapt, but transformational leaders can.

The church planter with transformational gifts needs careful assessment and supervision. Many strong leaders of this kind have shown character flaws—such as pride and abusiveness—that have led to major church breakdowns. This may cause some planting organizations to avoid such leaders altogether. Instead, look for church planters with this gifting set and test their

character by letting them devise thorough accountability systems for themselves. If they chafe at this or create poor models, they may not have the spiritual maturity for the job, despite their talents.

EVALUATING FRUITFULNESS

Here are a few questions that evaluate whether a church planter has produced fruit after five years:

- Is their spouse happy with their family life and spiritual health?
- Are around 15 to 25 percent of their laypeople engaged in lay ministry?
- Are 40 to 50 percent of the congregation in small groups?
- Is the church growing 5 to 7 percent a year, with 15 to 20 percent of that growth consisting of new believers?
- Are church members growing in maturity and holiness? Do they have a way to evaluate this?

MODELS FOR CHURCH PLANTING

The examples explored below are paradigms, or ideal paths of growth for common church plants that seldom exist in pure form. For innovators, these can be mixed or blended. This is *not* an effort to fit City to City's church planters into only two models or sub-models of planting a church.

Various authors describe the two basic approaches to church planting differently. Since most have a favorite, there is a tendency to name them in such a way to show one as preferred. To avoid this, the two models will be described rather than named.

Model #1	**Model #2**
Plant from scratch or with a core of no more than fifteen people.	Plant with a core group of forty to eighty volunteers drawn from a mother congregation or involuntarily gathered from other congregations.
Evangelize first and do not begin corporate worship until later.	Begin corporate worship as fast as possible and focus on evangelism later.
Pioneers plant the church.	Another church (or more) plants the church.
Slower growth.	Can experience rapid growth.
Model #1	**Model #2**
Low up-front costs, but financial support grows slowly.	High up-front costs, but financial support may grow quickly if the plant is successful.
Will grow with more conversions and unchurched people.	Will grow mainly by drawing existing Christians from other churches.

Model #1	Model #2
Helpful gifts for this model include evangelism and shepherding.	Helpful gifts for this model include prophetic leadership and teaching.
Advantages	**Advantages**
More conversions; fishes in "blue water"[20] to reach the unreached.	Fast momentum and excitement.
Lower up-front costs.	Can generate new income quickly.
Grows the overall body of Christ and doesn't drain other churches of attendees.	Energizes and deploys many Christians who were not active in evangelism or reaching their communities.
Disadvantages	**Disadvantages**
Can stay small and lose its outward face. May become addicted to intimacy.	Can drain the mother church of energy and resources, which can take years to recover from.
Can stay financially dependent on outside giving for a long time.	Can harm relationships in the city. They may receive accusations of "sheep stealing," as they fish in "red water" and only reach those other churches are already reaching.
Can lack an apostolic mindset for multiplication.	Can be built around the personality and public charisma of the main leader rather than the gospel.

I will call Model #1 the Pioneer Church Plant Model and Model #2 the Church Service Launch Model. However, each model can be carried out in rather different ways, so there are a good number of sub-models for each of them. For example, the gathered church, house church, and "missional expression" models are basically sub-models of the Pioneer Church Plant Model. Similarly, the new church, daughter church, satellite church, and adopted church models are sub-models of the Church Service Launch Model.[21]

MODEL #1: THE PIONEER CHURCH PLANT MODEL

In this model, we see that the church grows more through evangelism than transfer growth, and growth is usually slower. Through discipleship, these congregants are then dispersed into small groups. It is only after these first steps that gathered worship happens. In pioneer

[20] Using Chan Kim and Renée Mauborgne's business metaphor of red and blue oceans, Alan Hirsch speaks of new churches that "fish" in "blue water"—converting people that no other churches are reaching—and those that fish in "red water"—reaching the more traditionally churched people that other churches fight over (thus "red water" means conflict and "blood in the water"). See Alan Hirsch and Dave Ferguson, *On the Verge: A Journey into the Apostolic Future of the Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2011), 29–30.

[21] As some have pointed out, the two models might be combined into a hybrid where a larger gathered church sponsors many pioneer church plants and, in some cases, provides the Sunday preacher (remotely) while the pastor-evangelist works directly on-site.

church plants, monetary resources may come from mission agencies, funds raised from friends and other churches, self-employment, the tithes of a small core group, or a combination of all of these. Generally, the pioneer church plant is more innovative and adapted to its time and place.

The pioneer leader needs a coach and genuine accountability, but generally has more freedom than the church service launch planter. A solo approach to start pioneer church planting involves a lone church planter moving to a new area with family (or alone if single) and beginning from scratch. A team approach involves up to fifteen to twenty "EOBs" ("evangelistically oriented believers"),[22] along with a church planter. Author Peyton Jones believes plants should always be started by teams of a relatively small size.[23] The church-planting team should all be deeply committed to evangelism, but beyond this, it should function somewhat in the way an existing church's staff with multiple positions would function. Roughly speaking, a range of gifts should be sought within the team. There should be specialization, with some serving bi-vocationally.

Gathering the teams can be a process of mitosis, where all members come from a mother church plant or another church in the same city. It can also be a process of migration, where all members move from another town or place to a new city to establish a church. Or, it can be a mixture of both. If the target neighborhood is multiethnic, the team must also be correspondingly multiethnic from the start.

Training the team is often neglected, but this is an important part of church planting. If possible, the church planter should take six months or more to train the team in the gospel, in evangelism, in spiritual growth disciplines, and in the ways and means of church planting.

The team approach can have two variations. The first is a core-group approach which refers to individuals in a particular location coming together (usually out of several other churches) and agreeing to start a new church and look for a church planter. There are some dangers with this approach. If the church planter has not been part of the core group team gatherings, the team can think of themselves as the empowered "board" and the church planter as their employee. Despite this tendency, this approach can work.

The second team approach is indirect church planting. This refers to when a ministry that was not originally purposed to plant churches (such as an evangelistic ministry focused on businesspeople) finds that it has converts who don't fit into existing churches. The ministry then seeks to cooperate with a missions agency or local church to plant an entirely new church.

Below are some of the various sub-models of the pioneer church.

Gathered congregation. The goal for a gathered congregation is to worship in a public building on Sundays with both a program-based design (featuring programs focused on the

[22] This term and acronym come from ministry leader Craig Ellis.

[23] Peyton Jones, *Church Plantology: The Art and Science of Planting Churches* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2021), 161ff.

congregation's children, youth, men, and women) and a network of small groups. The gathered congregation is usually led by an ordained, full-time minister and normally grows by attracting people into either the large gatherings or small groups. The center of gravity for the church is in the large gathering—the most substantial worship, instruction, edification, evangelism, service, stewardship, and communication from leadership happens here. Small groups are also beneficial but optional.

The advantages of this sub-model are the following:

- **Stability:** When a key leader leaves, there are enough invested members to find someone to take their place.
- **Institutionalism:** This type of group can last for years, decades, or even centuries.
- **Evangelism:** Through preaching and other attractional events, they reach non-Christians who have been previously unwilling to commit to a community.
- **Expertise:** Generally, there are higher skill levels in pastoring, education, and teaching.

Conversely, the disadvantages of the gathered congregation sub-model are the following:

- The potential for bureaucracy or an overemphasis of traditionalism.
- Lower pastoral accountability.
- More passivity and nominalism from congregants, paired with a lack of discipleship.
- Institutional upkeep can keep the church absorbed in its own needs rather than willing to give away, plant, and reach out to the broader community.

Cell-celebration church. The goal of a cell-celebration church is to form multiple base communities, or "cells," that meet in homes. Growth comes through drawing people into those cells and multiplying the number of groups. Cell group membership is not optional; because there are virtually no other programs available, anyone who isn't in a cell isn't in the church. Education, discipleship, and mission happen predominantly through the cell. The center of gravity is in the small group, yet unlike house churches the cell groups exist within a single large church that meets for worship celebrations that are usually weekly.

This model can supply "the best of both worlds." It is more stable than the house church, because even if key members leave a cell group, the group can readily merge with others and continue. It is also highly flexible, as church functions can take place within the cells, and various ministry objectives such as programs can take place across all of the cells. However, many of the disadvantages of house churches are present in cell-celebration churches as well.

House church movement. House churches consist of one base community small enough to meet in a home or storefront, are led by a lay pastor or bi-vocational pastor, and are designed to continue meeting in smaller groups at other house churches rather than growing into a larger church. House church movements grow through relationships and mission in the neighborhood. The center of gravity for the church is the small group, and there is no

other space—all functions of worship, evangelism, instruction, service to the community, communion, stewardship, governance and leadership, and pastoral care and counseling happen in the house group.

This environment fosters intimate relationships due to the organic—rather than bureaucratic—nature of the group. Evangelism is then naturally encouraged throughout the process of forming these relationships. House churches also create a system with high accountability and the opportunity for informal lay or mutual pastoring, and they have relatively low costs. But they can also prove unstable and have a lack of sustained presence. The only gifts available for leadership, counseling, and more are those within the small house church. There is no opportunity to offer specialized ministries for children, youth, singles, and so on.

"Missional expression." All of the above sub-models aim to build churches that are self-sustaining, self-financing, self-governing, and self-propagating. Each of these churches seeks to mature into being interdependent with other churches and the whole body of Christ rather than being dependent on other churches' money, leadership, new members, or ideas.

Certain outreach and evangelistic ministries may never reach all four of these self-supporting goals. Take campus ministry, for example: students do not have the financial resources needed to support these ministries, and there is too much turnover among students for them to self-govern with long-term leaders. This may also be the case for ministries to the extremely poor, marginalized, or the skeptical (such as those within the arts).

Within a city, we must be open to reach out to populations who desperately need the gospel but may not be grounded enough to establish a traditional, self-supporting church. "Missional expression" is a term that encompasses outreach ministries that are open-ended—where there is no initial goal set for becoming self-sustaining, self-financing, self-governing, *and* self-propagating. The initial goal may instead be to find long-term support from a mother church or a network of churches.

CHURCH SERVICE LAUNCH MODEL

While the Pioneer Church Plant Model centers on evangelizing individuals first and gathered worship later, the Church Service Launch Model largely reverses that order by aiming to gather in worship immediately. It brings together a core group of people who already believe in Christianity, either from within a mother church or across a reached area, through publicity and networking. After launching gathered worship, the church focuses more on evangelism and discipleship. In these cases, money comes from the core group (which may pledge for a year to give the mother church the ability to plan), a subsidy from the mother church, outside grants from distant churches and individuals, or a combination of these avenues. These church plants grow faster but are less evangelistic and innovative because the church planter has less freedom and is usually supervised as a staff member of the mother church.

This type of church can also have various sub-models, as outlined below.

New church. Through publicity and networking—and without a mother church—the new church draws together enough Christians to launch a worship service and plant a new church from there. A classic example of this approach is found in Nelson Searcy and Kerrick Thomas' *Launch: Starting a New Church from Scratch*.[24]

Daughter church. This is when members of an established church separate to form a new, closely aligned but soon independent daughter congregation. All governance, financial, and membership functions separate from the mother church fairly quickly.

Satellite church. In satellite or site churches, a mother church forms an additional worship service with dedicated staff in another location, but many functions (such as budgeting, governance, and membership) remain centralized. Some things, such as music, worship, pastoral care, children's ministry, and preaching, might be carried out by dedicated staff on-site, but all staff and church members belong to the mother church.

There are several levels of decentralization possible. One example is preaching: other than the mother church preacher speaking regularly in person or via video, the on-site pastor does virtually all of the preaching.

Decision-making in these scenarios can be highly centralized in the mother church's governing board, or the site may receive more autonomy with its own advisory board. In the latter scenario, satellite churches could have many decisions delegated to them even while they legally and ecclesiastically remain under the mother church.

The satellite church could be considered a permanent or indefinite satellite, or it could be given a longer projected ramp-up time (such as five years or more) to become an established daughter church.

Adopted church. When an independent fellowship decides to join an established church (or a struggling, older, or smaller church is "replanted") through the help of the mother church, this is considered an adopted church.

Several established churches can each contribute members to a common daughter church, which may become the official daughter under the supervision of one of the contributing churches. Or, it may become an independent church with an advisory council made up of people from the contributing church. This is called a multi-mother or partnership church plant.

The church plant can also be focused on a particular people group or a multi-congregational plant. A few scenarios of this kind of plant are possible. The first is when a church establishes a new congregation among a particular language, ethnic, or social group, often using the same building so the congregations can be linked and use common services. The second is when the new church becomes a particular worship service and congregation within the mother church, so all its members are members of the mother church.

[24] Nelson Searcy and Kerrick Thomas, *Launch: Starting a New Church from Scratch* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2006 and 2017).

FOUR-STAGE PROCESSES FOR CHURCH PLANTING

Each of the two main church-planting models above can be broken down into two different four-stage processes that explain their journeys in greater detail. While distinct from one another, the first two and the last two stages do possess certain similarities. In the first two stages, the church planter initially focuses on personal work with individuals; building a staff, planning corporate worship, and organizing systems come later. In the final two stages, the church planter initially focuses on staff-building, preparing for a corporate worship launch, and organizing the systems of the church. These four-stage processes could be broken down further, but these models are common.

THE PROCESS OF THE PIONEER CHURCH PLANT: HOUSE CHURCH APPROACH[25]

This pioneer church plant starts with a hyper-local focus, emphasizes serving the community, and makes use of smaller gatherings of Christians such as cells or house churches. The process for developing this type of church usually happens in the following way.

Stage 1: Prepare (the first six months to a year). In this preparatory phase, the church planter is usually bi-vocational or completely unpaid. They are recruited and trained by being brought into an existing missional community, often some distance from where the new missional community will be started. The pastor becomes rooted in the new target neighborhood by residing there, enrolling family members in schools, getting involved in civic organizations, volunteering in local service activities, and taking part in the economic activity of the new locale—buying, selling, and working there. During this period, the planter begins to gather Christians who share the vision for such a church and are willing to live in a particular place. The church planter also evangelizes non-Christians in the neighborhood.

Stage 2: First missional community (the second year). In stage two, the church planter gathers existing Christians, new believers, and non-Christians into a weekly missional community that meets for fellowship, prayer, study of the Bible, and discussion in the neighborhood where the planter lives. From this, the planter develops a "discipleship core" within the missional community—these are those who agree to living a fairly demanding life of daily prayers, reading, instruction, service, and other disciplines. The discipleship core exists in triads of disciples holding one another accountable. At the same time, the planter leads the whole missional community to begin thinking about parish ministry through the following phases:

- **Vision phase:** Establish a theology of place and create guidelines for taking root in a community. For example, how strict will the plant be about where members live and work?

[25] See JR Woodward and Dan White, Jr., *The Church as Movement: Starting and Sustaining Missional-Incarnational Communities* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2016); Paul Sparks, et al., *The New Parish: How Neighborhood Churches are Transforming Mission, Discipleship, and Community* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2014); Len Tang and Charles Cotherman, eds., *Sent to Flourish: A Guide to Planting and Multiplying Churches* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2019).

- **Learning phase:** Learn about the neighborhood, its history, demographics, needs, and opportunities. Hold discussions with local leaders. Take walks together and listen to those in the neighborhood.
- **Discernment phase:** Talk to people in the community about their needs and determine what contribution the missional community can make to the common good of the neighborhood.
- **Action phase:** Determine what to do and how to carry it out. As the missional community grows, evangelize organically and seek to build up the discipleship core so it comprises as much of the missional community as possible.

Stage 3: New missional communities (the second to third year). When the first missional community grows to about thirty people or more, one or two new missional communities begin—preferably in different neighborhoods—either using leaders from the original community or by bringing in a new leader.

Stage 4: Worship celebration (the fourth or fifth year). When four or five missional communities are established, a worship celebration of corporate praise and teaching begins. Recruiting staff is likely now necessary. This can potentially become a kind of cell church or a network of house churches.

This four-stage pathway can have some variations, however. For example, the house churches may form a loose network without the goal of larger public worship. With cell churches, the goal may be to have a more centralized network of home cell groups that meet monthly for worship once a critical mass is reached. Lastly, by the time three years have passed, the house church(es) may become self-supporting, but this is dependent on whether parishioners are professionals, blue-collar, or poor, as well as a mixture of other factors.

THE PROCESS OF THE PIONEER CHURCH PLANT: PIONEER EVANGELISM APPROACH[26]

This church has a local focus and starts out evangelizing disciples. The journey for this church usually happens in the following way.

Stage 1: Learn and gather (the first five to six months). The church planter and their team learn about a community by researching the area and the people they want to reach. In this stage, they network, network, and network some more. They inhabit local places where people in the neighborhood gather and build a network of relationships with at least fifty non-Christians. These are usually people they have met more than twice. They also gather Christians who are both committed to the vision and oriented toward outreach, as well as new Christians (and even some enthusiastic almost-Christians). For Christians, prayer groups that cast vision are formed. These groups brainstorm together—they don't just begin a class on "the biblical church." They begin

[26] See Dietrich Schindler, *The Jesus Model: Planting Churches the Jesus Way* (Carlisle, UK: Piquant, 2013); Timothy J. Keller and J. Allen Thompson, *Redeemer Church Planter Manual* (Redeemer City to City, 2002); Michael Green, *Evangelism through the Local Church* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1992).

each meeting with a devotional, then ask, "What are the non-Christians in our community like?" They draw up a spiritual profile of these people—their fears, prejudices, hopes, goals, and beliefs. Group members envision the other's half of the conversation by imagining what they would say about Christianity. They also figure out what sub-types of people are in the community, then ask, "How will this church need to be if we are going to reach these folks? What will our side of the conversation be? And how will we communicate?" Finally, they pray this church into existence.

For new Christians and non-Christians alike, evangelistic groups and events are formed. These groups start by engaging non-believers in conversations, simply letting people know they are Christians who are planting a church. They show them hospitality in informal conversations that take place throughout the course of daily life. The group also hosts service projects in which Christians invite non-Christians to volunteer with them to benefit others in the community. Members of the team can also invite one or more non-Christians to an event—a concert, a lecture, an art presentation, a public debate, or a dialogue with a religious theme. Afterwards, they might discuss what they both saw. Even the internet and social media can be helpful tools for contacting local people about Christian themes and subjects, getting deeper into conversations about what they believe or don't believe and the reasons why.

The planter and the team also invite new Christians and non-Christians into a group focused on processing the Christian faith. These could be called anything—"Discovering," "Exploring," or "Questioning" Christianity groups—or they could have no name at all. There are many possible approaches to these gatherings: they may choose to read a book together, go through a topical course of apologetic questions, or host a simple evangelistic Bible study that explains the gospel.

During this stage a clear, compelling, and accessible timeline of the vision is formulated for the new church. By the end of this stage, a pioneer evangelism plant usually has about fifteen to twenty Christians, new Christians, and almost-Christians who are committed to the plant; and the planter and their team usually have at least fifty ongoing, face-to-face relationships with non-believers. If the plant starts with ten to twenty "EOBs" ("evangelistically oriented believers"), from a local church, this entire phase can take less than six months.

Stage 2: Grow in groups (the first six to twelve months). At this point, the plant begins to form a small-group system. After an evangelistic inquirers' group is established in the last stage, a leadership group is begun in this stage. This group takes the most highly committed people with the potential to lead and begins training them in basic and intermediate discipleship and group-leadership skills. This group can function somewhat like an informal leadership council.

Then, evangelism is increased, and more large-group events take place. These could take the form of open forums and evangelistic talks, events, or meals with special interest groups (such as moms, women in business, or artists) that address concerns with Christian wisdom. More internet inquiries, newspaper ads, or mailings can be dispersed to advertise preview worship services. Planters aim to follow up with absolutely everyone who comes to these services. The plant can host or participate in community service projects and invite non-Christians to volunteer. All the Christians and non-Christians connected to the plant can be brought into small groups. (The

planter sometimes leads one or two, but if the groups grow beyond that, the planter usually trains leaders and supervises them.)

Holding preview worship services twice a month is a great way to show everyone what the church looks like. Such services are ideally held on Sunday afternoons or evenings so anyone who may attend another church still has a chance to attend. When beginning the services, planters usually say something along the lines of, "We are exploring the message, making friends, and developing ministry organization at these services." Regular "vision nights" also usually take place, to reach new interested Christians. Activities such as picnics or social events can also bring people together to build and strengthen relationships.

In phase two, planters meet regularly with their start-up team—those in their leadership team, as well as others committed to bringing people into the church and helping with the launch of weekly worship.

When things are going slowly, the planter usually limits themselves to holding a monthly worship service while multiplying through more evangelistic small groups, more vision nights, and community events until fifty to seventy people have committed. At that size, the plant is ready to move on to stage three.

Stage 3: Launch worship. In this stage, the planter and the team begin weekly worship when they are sure they will have sixty or more people present. They may use multiple means to draw people to these services: word of mouth, websites and social media, radio, printed advertisements, and so on. Those who attend are immediately invited to join small groups and expand the network. After each week's service, there is a brief meeting for newcomers to ask questions. There, the planter meets with those wanting to explore Christianity or know more about the church and its beliefs. Planters find ways to train and acclimate all newcomers to the DNA and ethos of the new congregation. Some churches also hold membership classes after the service, as well as beginning a bi-weekly or monthly ministry community meeting for its lay leaders.

This stage ordinarily leads to a leap forward in growth, as it attracts many Christians who will not participate in a plant until they see critical mass and evidence of success. This growth means many of the ministries in the church become more systematic, including worship, evangelism, assimilation, stewardship, small groups, instruction and discipleship, community service and justice, faith and work integration, and leadership development.

A new leadership team is usually constituted at this point, based on individuals' character and competencies during the launch process.

Stage 4: Organize (the first one to three years). In this stage, the church organizes by finding its footing formally, legally, and ecclesiastically. Here are some signs that a church may be healthy enough to organize:

- Attendance has grown by at least 5 to 7 percent each year.
- Half of worship attendees have joined small groups.
- Evangelistic activities have grown and shown fruit.

- Membership classes have grown.
- There is a sufficient number of new leaders and officers.
- The church supports itself financially.

Once it becomes feasible to do so, a healthy goal for an organized church is to reproduce by planting a satellite or a daughter church.

This pathway also has variations. The church may be started by a full-time church planter with a small core group of ten or more people, or it may be started by a bi-vocational church planter. A modified cell church model may meet three times a month for worship and once a month in a cell group. They may become a self-supporting church by the end of the third or fourth year, but if this church is set among the poor, it may never reach self-support.

THE PROCESS OF THE CHURCH SERVICE LAUNCH: NEW CHURCH APPROACH[27]

This version of the Church Service Launch Model is usually focused on a region rather than a small, specific community or group of people. It starts by beginning worship services and preaching right away. The pathway for this type of church launch usually looks something like the following.

Stage 1: Prepare. The right church planter is found in this step. Church planters in this model need more skill in a couple of areas than those who follow the Pioneer Church Plant Model—namely, public speaking and administrative management. These individuals need to know how to delegate, supervise, and grow an organization. It is helpful for the planter to have some sort of sending group that can provide oversight and accountability.

Next, a strategy is developed. The planter must research the location and community they plan to reside in. This includes planning for mission, outlining the values and vision of the church, and setting concrete goals (as well as benchmarks to reach before moving through the stages of preparation, pre-launch, and launch). Planters need to raise funds and develop a budget from financial partners—friends and churches that support the plant, denominational or network grants, personal savings, bi-vocational salary, a spouse's vocation, or a launch team tithe (this final source is hard to count on).

The final step of stage one is to build the first iteration of staff. Hiring staff does not usually happen when volunteers can manage the needs; however, hiring precedes growth. Members of the worship team or children's ministry team (unless their community has very few children) are usually hired first. They may hire part-time help from within their launch team.

Stage 2: Pre-launch. In this phase, the emphasis is on preparing for the first weekly worship service and gathering a launch team. The goal is to launch as publicly and as large in numbers

[27] See Searcy and Thomas, *Launch.* The chapter on fundraising with partners is well worth note. Clint Clifton, *Church Planting Thresholds: A Gospel-Centered Church Planting Guide* (New City Network, 2016).

as possible. A target date is set for a launch of weekly worship. This date allows sufficient time to accomplish all other necessary preparation and falls within a good season—when school starts, around Easter, or at the start of a new year. A location for monthly preview services is chosen, as well as eventual weekly services. Ideally, this space is conveniently located, feels familiar and comfortable for the community, and allows room to grow.

Monthly preview services begin four to six months prior to the launch date (and no less than four months). These services attract more people to the launch team, give planters invaluable practice, and allow for experimentation and minor failures in a low-risk and low-stress environment as they become more familiar with what to do. They also provide a way to test out spaces, technology, and people as momentum builds. Finally, and crucially, planters follow up with absolutely everyone who attends these services.

Planters gathering a launch team are ideally aware of the difference between a launch team and a core group.

Launch Team	Traditional Core Group
Lives in the target area of the church.	Can live anywhere.
Exists only through the first weekly service.	Exists indefinitely.
Is engaged only to accomplish a task.	Engaged to build intimate fellowship and grow spiritually.
Focuses totally on those outside the group.	Focuses mainly on those within.
Can include enthusiastic non-Christians.	Includes generally only mature Christians.

A core group tends to perceive itself as "the church" the moment they begin doing anything together. This may lead to them failing to understand their role in outreach in order to create a new church because they feel they already *are* the church. While they may invite people to come in and share, the core group inevitably focuses less on outreach. By comparison, the launch team does read the Bible and pray together, but the main focus is always on the future and those outside the church. If this orientation is not kept, the core group works more on inside relationships that become relatively harder for newcomers to break into. The launch team can start small, and each monthly preview service can bring new people to the launch team. In this scenario, planters look for those who seem enthusiastic and supportive, those who live in the target area, those who are most like the people they are trying to reach in the target area, and new believers with a lot of non-Christian friends.

During the pre-launch stage, preview services are promoted. Advertising can be accomplished by working with professionals to design marketing materials. These materials clearly communicate that this is a new church that wants people to join the service, and are promoted in event-oriented newspapers, trade journals, radio, cable, and the web—*not* in Christian outlets. A buzz can also be created through word of mouth by making a large number of personal invitations. This can be as simple as the church planter and everyone connected to the church inviting everyone they already know. The plant can host events that attract new people: coffee house

nights, picnics in the park, movie nights, holiday celebrations, service projects, and more. Events like these are easy to invite friends to, and from there, attendees can be given an invitation to the church service.

Stage 3: Launch. If the launch team has done its work, there will be both Christians and non-Christians present at the first regular worship service. In general, those in attendance will likely be there in response to personal invitations, not advertising or marketing. This model assumes the launch service will have a compelling preacher who contextualizes effectively and relates well to Christian and non-Christian audiences.

Almost immediately in stage three, the church comes into a new existence: the launch team is disbanded; and new systems are set up for worship, evangelism, assimilation, stewardship, small groups, instruction and discipleship, community service and justice, and leadership development. A new leadership team is constituted based on individuals' character and competencies during the launch process.

Stage 4: Reproduce. After the church has grown to a healthy size and is self-supporting, the church explores the idea of reproducing by planting a satellite or a daughter church.

THE PROCESS OF THE CHURCH SERVICE LAUNCH: DAUGHTER OR SATELLITE CHURCH APPROACH[28]

The goal of a daughter church is to deploy several of a mother church's members to plant a local church somewhere in the same city or locale that quickly becomes independent from the mother church (though it may stay in close relationship indefinitely). A satellite congregation may function as another site of the mother church for a longer period (such as five to seven years) but be expected to eventually become a stand-alone church. It may also stay dependent on the mother church indefinitely.

The process for this approach is nearly identical to the new church approach. This church is also regionally focused and leads with worship services, with the main difference being that the core group of believers originates from a mother church rather than through personal invitations and marketing. Nevertheless, planting a daughter or satellite church is still a unique journey that requires description.

Stage 1: Realistic kingdom orientation. Rather than describing the daughter or satellite church, this first meta-stage focuses on the sending church. It is important to determine if the mother church has realistic expectations about the planting experience. Mother churches should note that daughter or site churches require time, money, and effort. Additionally, for every two people who leave the mother church, there will be one or two new people drawn into the daughter or site church who were not going to their church before (a good percentage of whom are

[28] Ralph Moore, *Starting a New Church: The Church Planter's Guide to Success* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2002); Aubrey Malphurs, *The Nuts and Bolts of Church Planting: A Guide for Starting Any Kind of Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2012).

unchurched or non-Christian). Therefore, the overall network of Christians grows much more than it could have otherwise.

Third, the mother church will be incentivized to reach out and grow. While the loss of the church-planting core group is a challenge, it can also make room—sometimes literally in the seats—and provide a new impetus for outreach. A launch leads to accelerated growth between the mother and daughter or satellite. After the initial loss, the mother church ideally grows back to the size it was (and even beyond), and the church plant sees kingdom growth faster than it might have done otherwise.

Another consideration is supporting staff and volunteers. Daughter church plants tend to attract a disproportionate number of the more ambitious people, and so many of the best lay leaders will go with a new church plant, leaving a high number of "job vacancies" in the mother church. The plant will be costly in terms of relationships (even leading to a sense of bereavement) and a sense of lost energy with fewer people in services. The mother will actually feel like a different church, which takes some adjustment. Both the losses and new growth that come with planting mean the mother church changes more rapidly over a period of two to three years than it has in some time. Leaders ask, "Who are we now?" They look for new needs to meet and opportunities to capitalize on. There is also a loss of income—many people who leave are stronger givers than the new people who come.

The mother church must, in a sense, reboot and relaunch its own outreach and extend its own future vision as it plants the new church. Many have found that the mother church will need to organize its own major initiatives in outreach and mission to coincide with the same year it sends the church plant out. This is actually a great opportunity to begin new ministries—particularly new outreach efforts—in the mother church. In his book *Planting Churches*, Stuart Murray writes:

> [Mother] churches will be well advised to integrate this preparatory work into all aspects of their program and community life—sermons, home groups, prayer meetings, main gatherings, business meetings, pastoral visiting and informal conversations … Inadequate or half-hearted preparation risks problems further down the track as well as squandering an unusual opportunity to explore missional and ecclesial issues together and to introduce new initiatives within the church.[29]

The mother church not only enhances outreach but also puts before the congregation a vision for its own future. Murray continues:

> A vision of its own life beyond the process of church planting is crucial … otherwise, once the planting team has been deployed and the new church is up and running, the planting church can become very lethargic and begin to stagnate … This might be

[29] Stuart Murray, *Planting Churches: A Framework for Practitioners* (Carlisle, UK: Paternoster, 2008), 118.

> a social action project, an evangelistic initiative, a proposal to reshape or renew the church's premises … or something else.[30]

Nonetheless, does the mother church, looking at the gains and losses to come, have a vision for the kingdom? Do they have a joy in the kingdom's growth that is greater than their desire for institutional security? Any church that is more concerned by their own losses than by kingdom gains betrays its narrow interests. In the long run, the benefits of planting new churches are greater than those of maintaining an undivided, older congregation, even if they may not be initially obvious.

Stage 2: Plan. The planning stage for a daughter or satellite church includes some decision-making.

Church planter: This is usually a staff person of the mother church or someone who joins its staff for a period of time. It is important for the whole mother church congregation to be supportive of the daughter, and this ensures they can form a relationship with the planter.

Size: The core group from the mother church can vary in size, especially depending on the size of the mother church. A typical number is around 10 to 20 percent of the congregation, so twenty-five to thirty-five people leaving a church of 150 to 200 people is normal. The size may also depend on other considerations, such as the character of the church. A new church may need a smaller, more carefully recruited core group.

Location: The church plant is usually located relatively close to the mother church, yet far enough away to exist in a distinct neighborhood or region. It's best to find some key barrier such as a beltway or river that differentiates regions in the minds of locals.

Rationale: The reasons for planting a church can be manifold.

- To reach a locale that is harder for the mother church to reach, due to location or other issues.
- To give believers greater scope for their gifts—many people who go with the daughter or satellite church end up giving more money and time to the new ministry than they did in the mother church.
- To grow the whole body of Christ—and the denomination as well.

In this planning stage, relational expectations are defined between the mother church and the daughter or site. What is the path toward organization and becoming self-supporting? (A daughter church will become independent more quickly while a satellite may do it more slowly or never at all.) How different will the daughter or site be from the mother church? How will decisions be made, such as what can be done only with approval, what can be done with routine reporting, and what can be done without consulting or reporting? What will the budgets and financial expenditures be?

[30] Ibid., 118–119.

Stage 3: Pre-launch. Designation of the staff is based partly on the size of the core group and partly on the money raised but, in any case, is provisional and an estimate. If the church grows faster or slower than anticipated, changes in staffing should occur. In general, wise staffing precedes growth rather than responds to it.

During pre-launch, the core group is gathered. This can be done through a general call to the members, an invitation of existing cell groups, or an invitation to members who live in the vicinity of the new church plant.

The greatest challenge facing daughter and satellite launches is turning the core group into a launch team that is outward facing rather than focused on creating a church that fits their needs. Being aware of this tendency, planters prepare the core group by holding prayer meetings that cast vision, teaching the DNA of the new church, encouraging public faith (reaching out to one's friends and colleagues as a believer), and possibly holding preview services (though not as many as in the Pioneer Church Plant Model).

Stage 4: Launch. After new systems are set up for worship, evangelism, assimilation, stewardship, small groups, instruction and discipleship, community service and justice, and leadership development, a new leadership team is constituted, again based on character and competencies during the launch process.

ADDITIONAL READING RECOMMENDED BY CITY TO CITY

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PART EIGHTEEN

Movements

We live in a time when social movements are wildly popular. These days, few people—especially among the young—want to start an organization or institution that makes glacial modifications to its field. Instead, most people want to be part of a *movement* that fills the streets and brings about change quickly! Many once-trusted institutions are now considered useless at best and corrupt at worst.

Christian institutions are no exception from this scrutiny, and some of it is deserved, as there are many stagnant and declining churches, denominations, and organizations. If our goal is to bring the gospel to cities like never before, how are we to reverse this stagnation? It's easy to dismiss organizations and instead to advocate for a dynamic movement. Indeed, we need movements. But movements are hard to ignite and even harder to sustain. The reason for this difficulty is that we not only misunderstand movements but also their main alternative—institutions. However, as this paper will explore, movements and institutions are not diametrically opposed. Rather, they exist on a spectrum and there can be overlap. Movements can (and *must*) have institutional elements, and institutions must have their movement dynamics renewed. Once this relationship is understood, ministry leaders can begin to concentrate on how to promote movement dynamics.

INSTITUTIONS

Today, young adults in the West tend to be distrustful of institutions and often choose to circumvent them to achieve their goals. Instead, they are more likely to be enamored with movements. Two forms of movements that are preferred over institutions are *social movements*, which seek social changes for a more just society; and *social networks*, which have little hierarchy or organization but a lot of informal, shared passion.

Movements and networks feel far more democratic and creative than institutions. They promise creativity and rapid growth. They seem more moral, more selfless, and less corruptible than institutions. Even in much literature about church renewal and church planting, institutionalism is too often seen as the main villain, and movements the main hero.

MISUNDERSTANDING INSTITUTIONS

In *A Time to Build*, a must-read book for Americans, political analyst Yuval Levin shows that a loss of faith in institutions is fatal to a society's health.[1] He makes the argument that the current

[1] More about Levin's conclusions can be found in *A Time to Build: From Family and Community to Congress and the Campus, How Recommitting to our Institutions Can Revive the American Dream* (New York: Basic Books, 2020).

cultural and political polarization in the U.S. is largely due to the weakening of institutions, and, in a chapter on religion and the church, he shows how so many fast-growing megachurches and church-planting movements "blow up" from scandal because churches are no longer institutions with accountability and safeguards but rather platforms for dynamic individuals and groups.

Effective organizations combine both movemental and institutional dynamics. For example, what accounts for the relative ineffectiveness of 2011's Occupy Wall Street movement and the spectacular success of the movement advocating for same-sex marriage? The answer may be that the Occupy movement insisted on being a "pure movement" with no leaders, no vested authority, and no formal organization of any kind. After about two months, it ebbed away. The movement for same-sex marriage, however, created a number of institutions to sustainably carry out its vision, including the highly effective Human Rights Campaign foundation. Of course, there is ongoing controversy between grassroots movement leaders and institutional leaders over whether the institutions have "sold out," or strayed from their original principles and lost touch with the common person. That kind of self-criticism is normal and inevitable. But the conclusion remains that effective organizations combine movement and institutional features.

But how do they combine these features? What *are* the features of a movement and the features of an institution? We will explore these questions throughout the rest of this paper, but I will share my conclusion now, at the outset. Human organizations tend to evolve toward institutional features. The challenge, therefore, is how the organization can maintain and renew movement features. In the end, it is important for an organization to adopt certain institutional features while also constantly emphasizing and enhancing movement mechanics and dynamics.

THE MARKS OF INSTITUTIONS

Levin provides a useful description of an institution's nature:

> Institutions can be defined as the durable forms of our common life … Each institution (1) works to accomplish some socially important task … by (2) establishing a structure and a process—a form—for combining people's efforts toward accomplishing that task [over a long period of time].[2]

> Some institutions are organizations and have something like a corporate form. A university, a hospital, a legislature, a military, a company, and a civic association are all institutions. They are technically and legally formalized … Some institutions are durable forms of a different sort: they may be shaped by laws, norms, and rules but lack a corporate structure. The family is an institution … and many [crafts and vocations, even those without formal unions and associations] are institutions.[3]

[2] Levin, *A Time to Build*, 31.

[3] Ibid., 19.

Overall, institutions can be marked by the following characteristics.

An appreciation for—and an honoring of—history. In his book *On Thinking Institutionally*, political scientist Hugh Heclo states the following:

> The emphasis is not on thinking up things for yourself, but on thoughtfully taking delivery of and using what has been handed down to us … . Faithful reception … establishes a connection with … the past. … Because the [historic] ways are valued, thinking institutionally gives no special preference to newness and originality for its own sake.[4]

Innovation is certainly valuable and necessary in institutions. However, Heclo goes on, "Legitimate innovation is meant to realize, with greater skill and fidelity, the larger potential of what [has been given to us.]"[5] Institutions value tradition in a way that movements do not. While movements are strongly future-oriented, institutions look to the past as well as the future.

A set of values that are "bigger than us." In institutions, there is a subjugation of one's personal values and ambitions for the greater good and mission of the institution. An example of this can be found in the speech Ryne Sandberg gave when he was inducted into America's Baseball Hall of Fame:

> I was in awe every time I walked onto the field. That's respect. … [If] you hit a home run, put your head down, drop the bat, run around the bases, because the name on the front [of your uniform—your team name] is a lot more important than the name on the back [your personal name]. That's respect … A lot of people say this honor today validates my career, but I didn't work hard for validation. I didn't play the game right because I saw a reward at the end of the tunnel. I played it right because that's what you're supposed to do, play it right and with respect.[6]

Institutions demand more personal submission to the overarching goal than movements do. While movements are more accommodating toward assertive individual members that stray from the norm, institutions stress conformity to their standards.

An emphasis on durability and resistance to change. Heclo also remarks that "Institutional thinking [is a] stretching of time horizons."[7] Institutions function with a long-term state of mind.

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[4] Hugh Heclo, *On Thinking Institutionally* (Boulder, CO: Paradigm, 2008), 98–99.

[5] Ibid.

[6] Quoted in Heclo, *On Thinking Institutionally*, 3.

[7] Ibid., 109.

They want their work to last, and so they tend to value lasting durability and are resistant to change.

Human beings are famously creatures of ritual. We create habitual patterns and rhythms to our lives because we enjoy predictability and cannot stand too much change. Institutionalization *is* predictability and resistance to change, and it is crucial for livability. For example, retail stores have institutionalized the concept of "checking out" to pay for whatever goods we want to buy. As customers, we look for a cashier's counter or self-checkouts when we are ready to leave. But imagine the chaos if every store had a completely different way of receiving payment from shoppers. Or, for a more dramatic example, imagine what would happen if the rules and patterns of automobile traffic changed every day. Or imagine if the style of worship in a church completely changed every single week. The congregants would go crazy! When we think about it, most of human life is institutionalized, and that can often be a good thing. Institutions champion this sense of durability and are wary of quick changes in direction, while movements are strongly innovative.

An emphasis on form and structure. Levin notes the following:

> Institutions are by their nature formative. They … structure us. … One of the important ways that institutions accomplish this task of formation is by giving each of us a role and therefore a shape or form in the world. We pour ourselves into our family, our community, our church, our work, or our school (all institutions) and in so doing we begin to take the institution's shape. It both protects us and empowers us to interact with others. We aren't just loose individuals bumping into each other. We fill roles, we occupy places, we play parts defined by larger wholes, and that helps us understand our … purposes. It moves us to ask … "Given my role here, how should I act?"[8]

Institutions are formally and explicitly structured. Movements are "flatter" in their organization, with most employees possessing a similar level of power rather than the vertical degrees of power found in a hierarchical structure. Movements also tend to be fluid, while institutions are more likely to be stable.

An ongoing social purpose, something important that can only be done together. Referring to the notion of institutions maintaining an ongoing social purpose, Levin notes that "Each institution works to accomplish some socially important task (say educating the young, making laws, defending the country, serving God, helping the poor, producing some service or product or meeting a need)."[9] Institutions carry out a specific function. While movements are focused on bringing about a future state that may be more nebulous and less defined, institutions are focused on being the means to make a defined change. They may, however, be less clear on what the eventual endpoint will be.

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[8] Levin, *A Time to Build*, 20–21.

[9] Ibid., 31.

THE MARKS OF INSTITUTION-ITIS

The above marks of institutions portray them at their best. But as many have pointed out, institutions tend toward what is called institutionalism—or what can be referred to as "institution-itis." In this case, an institution's natural features become weaknesses. Slow change becomes *no* change. Honoring history becomes enslavement to the past. And higher structure and accountability become bureaucratic paralysis and inaction. Most of all, the institution's focus on outward purpose—serving a need or group outside itself—is lost, and its actual purpose is functioning for its own sake, for the power and benefits of the members.

For example, when a school becomes more concerned with the benefits and power of the teachers and administrators than about the welfare of the students, or when a medical facility is more focused on the pay of the staff than the care of the patients, or when a labor union becomes more concerned with the power of union employees than of the workers it represents—institution-itis has set in and the organization has grown dysfunctional.[10]

It is not uncommon for successful movements to grow increasingly institutional over time and eventually fall prey to the weaknesses of institution-itis. The following chart offers a brief comparison of the three entities:

Movement	Institution	Institution-itis
Emphasis on the future and rereading the present.	Honors history.	Highly traditional; largely looks to the past.
Ideas come from all members, and shared leadership is emphasized. Power is distributed in a fairly egalitarian way, though leaders still lead.	Individuals submit to the whole; power is usually kept at the top but not selfishly or abusively.	Ideas and innovation are always mandated from those at the top, who often hold power jealously or abusively.
Open to change, dynamic, and quick to make decisions.	Champions long-term durability; change is slow and deliberate.	Resistant to any change; slow to make decisions.
Held together by a sacrificial commitment to the vision. Structure has more informal and voluntary parts.	Formalized and less fluid in form and structure.	Held together mainly by rules and procedure. Structure is rigid.
Focused on a general future outcome and whatever it takes to get there.	Focused on a more specific, functional, socially important task.	Focused on maintenance of institution, turf, and benefits of the institution's members.

[10] For an accessible description of how outward-focused movements tend to become self-serving, entrenched, and fossilized institutions, see chapter two, "Tribes, Movements, and Organizations" in Lyle Schaller's *Getting Things Done* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1986), 27–47.

Movement	Institution	Institution-itis
Serves a cause—a vision for something that needs to happen.	Serves a constituency—a population in need.	Serves itself—the people within the institution.
Generally more trustful of people—at least the individuals who have bought into the vision and cause.	Generally mistrustful of human nature. Institutions are viewed as a beneficial way to discipline it.[11]	Highly mistrustful of anyone outside the organization.
Rapid growth at first and steady growth for a number of years is possible.	Slow and steady growth in some seasons, maintenance in others.	Little or no growth—generally in slow or fast decline, and in denial about it.

HOW MOVEMENTS FALL PREY TO INSTITUTION-ITIS

There are certain voluntary, beneficial reasons for movements to acquire more institutional behavior. With their constant changes, nebulousness, and lack of structure, movements can make for an exhausting environment to work in for long periods of time. In the beginning, leaders can work almost free of charge, but this is not sustainable long term. As noted above, institutions have staying power and can afford to pay dedicated staff. To return to an earlier example, activists seeking to legalize same-sex marriage spent decades moving their cause forward through institutions rather than informal rallies and protests on the streets. When a movement deliberately takes on some institutional features in a thoughtful, planned way, the result can be a blend of these factors that creates an organization with long-lasting movement dynamics.

But there are also involuntary, harmful reasons movements head toward institutionalism. Often, institutional factors are forced on a movement when its fluidity and loose distribution of power lead to breakdown. Movements do not have a lot of structure, which is a major reason for their ability to innovate and grow faster than institutions can. And yet so often that lack of structure allows for abuse or mismanagement, and when these are discovered there can be an overreaction to rapidly shift to a far more institutionalized form. If an abuse or moral violation is severe, a quick move to institutionalizing may be the only way to save the entire enterprise. However, the lack of trust and disillusion that comes from the violation can still maim the movement. When movements are driven to becoming more institutional because of breakdowns and problems, they are more susceptible to institution-itis. Regardless, any movement that exists for twenty-five years or so will need to be careful about resisting institution-itis.

[11] "To paraphrase Katherine Hepburn's retort to the cynicism of Humphrey Bogart's character in the movie *The African Queen*: 'Human nature, Mr. Allnutt, is what we put institutions in this world to rise above. … We turn to institutions and their standards to help restrain and channel our ordinary human impulses to lie, cheat, and steal.'" Quoted in Heclo, *On Thinking Institutionally*, 25.

Church consultant and author Lyle Schaller says that, instead of stressing the shared vision and common commitment, organizations with institution-itis display the following traits:

> 1) a greater reliance on precedents, rules, and quotas to define duties of members and to determine their entitlements, 2) a greater emphasis on … measurable accomplishments or shortcomings which are the result of identifiable acts rather than on the more subjective assessments of character, gifts, or motives, and 3) the formulation of a clearly defined procedural criteria for allocating benefits, rewards, and punishments. … Measurable criteria such as tenure, seniority, age, support of programs [are] perceived as more influential in the making of appointments than gifts, skills, talent, and graces.[12]

Good leaders keep their movement a movement even as they embrace some institutional features for durability that help the movement. "The best leaders have either an intuitive or well-worked out framework that enables them to minimize the impact of 'creeping legalism'" and continually call people back to the basic vision and shared, core commitments.[13]

THE GOODNESS OF TRADITION

Much of the Christian literature on movements is decidedly anti-institutional. In these works, institutions serve as the fate to be avoided. This is an acceptable approach at a very high level, as there is no doubt that churches and denominations often have institution-itis in various forms. The longer an organization exists, the more it naturally trends toward the creeping legalism of being over-institutionalized. To maintain some movement dynamics takes great effort, and many forsake attempting it at all.

But much of this literature on movements unnecessarily eschews Christian traditions, of which there are many! For example, there are many Protestant worship traditions such as those in Anglicanism, Lutheranism, Presbyterianism, and plenty of other denominations (and this is without even addressing whether the music is "contemporary" or not).[14] No church is biblically bound to one of these styles, but they are rich resources from which we can learn. There are also various traditions for the practice of confession, for the role of church government, for the order of service, and every other church practice.

While this may not be the intended goal, much of the literature on Christian movements envisions churches as disconnected "vertically" from the church of the past and disconnected "horizontally" from accountable interconnectedness with other churches. But the traditions of

[12] Schaller, *Getting Things Done*, 39–40.

[13] Ibid., 43.

[14] See James F. White, *Protestant Worship: Traditions in Transition* (Louisville, KY: John Knox, 1989).

the church have wisdom within them that movements can use. They are the results of trial and error themselves, and to choose a tradition for one's church or movement not only provides far more accountability but also prevents a new church from having to "reinvent the wheel," or having to think out every doctrine and practice anew.

MOVEMENTS

English author and ministry leader Neil Powell's taxonomy brings helpful clarification in defining the term "movement."[15]

- A movement referred to as a "dynamic" indicates a matter of ethos or a mindset. Here, a movement describes an energy or a dynamic at play inside the life of an individual church, organization, or network.
- A movement referred to as an "organizing principle" indicates a matter of structure.
- A movement referred to as an "outcome" indicates something measured by results. This could be measured by a number of different criteria that seem to constitute momentum, such as the number of churches planted.

At various times in the discussion below, one of these three attributes of a movement might be more relevant than the others. Note, however, that they overlap in practice. The following sections will seek to distinguish between movement principles and movement practices. Often, Christian organizations see rapid growth as a result of a specific practice, which is then publicized as a universal way for other ministries to experience the same exponential expansion. In other words, a movement "mechanic," or method, is promoted as if it is a movement "dynamic," or principle. We should look at the mechanics of every revival and movement but remain careful not to universalize methods that will not work in all contexts.

Here are the defining characteristics of what City to City calls a "gospel movement."

GOSPEL RENEWAL DYNAMICS

Sociologically, a movement is an informal body of people assembled around a common goal, usually some sort of change or innovation. A Christian city movement, for example, is an informal alliance of churches, individuals, organizations, and institutions that unite around a vision for city-wide gospel impact as defined by the group members.

But we should distinguish between sociological movements—even one constituted by churches and ministries—and gospel movements. As was said in the four DNA papers on the

[15] John James and Neil Powell, *Together for the City: How Collaborative Church Planting Leads to Citywide Movements* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2019), 54–78.

gospel, the gospel has a supernatural, divine power (Romans 1:16–17) that in many ways takes a shape that resembles other kinds of social movements. But social movements can sometimes be fueled by anger rather than joy and love. Often, this anger is warranted because the movement seeks to rectify a grievous injustice, and many of the psalms (such as Psalm 137) show that passionate cries for justice are valid. But when a movement is mainly fueled by anger—a desire to demonize others and accrue power—it is far from the motives and goals of a gospel movement.

Therefore, the inner motivation of movement leaders and participants is all-important for a gospel movement. Is the motive a desire for power? Is the motive more negative than positive—*ressentiment* (to use Nietzsche's term) against a hated group? Is the motive a simple hunger for the warm feelings of "changing the world"? Is the motive an excessive adulation of a charismatic leader and the social control they command?

The fact that so many social movements operate with the preceding motivations shows how crucial it is that Christian movements be fueled at their foundations by the humble boldness, the thoughtful rejoicing, and the reordered loves that only the gospel itself can produce when it is applied to the heart by the means of grace (see the first and third DNA papers). Only the gospel can prevent us from falling into the fearfulness, selfishness, and legalism of institution-itis as well as into the hubris, overreach, unrealistic claims, or dependence on celebrities that can drive movements. Only the gospel compels people naturally and spontaneously to share their faith in love with others.

In their book *The Permanent Revolution*, authors Alan Hirsch and Tim Catchim list factors that encourage spontaneous, natural growth and expansion:

- When people whose lives have been affected profoundly by the gospel tell their stories to those who know them.
- When from the beginning, evangelism is the work of those within the culture.
- When new Christians are immediately given the opportunity to … minister to non-Christians … .
- When true doctrine results from the true experience of the power of Christ rather than mere intellectual instruction.[16]

A gospel movement is marked by a joyful, uncoerced, sacrificial commitment to the vision and work of the movement.

A COMPELLING VISION

A movement is fueled primarily by a compelling, concrete vision of a future state. This may be a future state for the church, for the city, for both, or for something else that fits with the biblical

[16] Alan Hirsch and Tim Catchim, *The Permanent Revolution: Apostolic Imagination and Practice for the 21st Century Church* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2012), 231.

callings of Christians. Hirsch and Catchim list this vision as one of the three traits of "apostolic movements," namely that they "breathe an atmosphere of 'can do' or perhaps even 'will do.' … They have a transformational vision for society, and a sense that they have a role to play in its transformation."[17]

A movement-engendering vision has to be ambitious but achievable with great sacrifice, faith, and help from God. It must be clear rather than vague, and identify concrete outcomes that will inform participants of how effective the movement is. The vision should be strongly connected not only to biblical themes and commands but also to broadly acknowledged problems in the church or the world. Lastly, it should be easily communicated to others. (See the section on reproducibility later in this paper.)

RELATION AND COLLABORATION

Movements heavily depend on informal ties and good friendships. A spirit of relationship and collaboration is one of the factors that gives a movement an attraction to newcomers and rapid growth. It also means that while institutions are much more top-down and their departments can be isolated, turf-conscious, and competitive, movements get ideas *across* the organization. Ideas bubble up from all over. Hirsch and Catchim write that "the favored structure of dynamic apostolic movements is … the more fluid, decentralized, adaptive network where power and function are dispersed throughout the organization, even at the outer edges."[18] In Hirsch's book *The Starfish and the Spirit*, coauthored with Lance Ford and Rob Wegner, this approach to shared leadership is broken down into five habits:

- vision-setting over micromanagement,
- equipping over directing,
- partnering over paternalism,
- coaching over bossing, and
- collaboratively co-laboring.[19]

Collaboration readily happens within movements with growing friendships. Power tends to be distributed more widely than in institutions, and there is a bias toward shared leadership rather than having one person making all the decisions. There are overlapping networks of capital (businesspeople with money, scholars with insights, or ministers with doctrine) that are united by friendship and can be enormously fruitful.

Addendum: APEST. Alan Hirsch champions the belief that the five kinds of leaders in Ephesians 4:11–13 (apostles, prophets, evangelists, shepherds, and teachers—or APEST) are paradigmatic for

[17] Ibid., 212.

[18] Ibid.

[19] Lance Ford, Rob Wegner, Alan Hirsch, *The Starfish and the Spirit: Unleashing the Leadership Potential of Churches and Organizations* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2021), 96–134.

all times and cultures, and that these five types of leaders must each be present for a gospel movement to thrive.[20] The APEST teaching is extremely helpful and important in at least two ways.

First, it reminds us of the fact that no single church planter has all the spiritual and leadership gifts that a gospel movement requires. From the outset, a ministry leader must be surrounded by empowered Christians whose gifts supplement and complement their own.

Second, it reminds us of the fact that no single church planter should make all of a church's decisions or hold all of the power. Even at the beginning of a church plant's life, when the church planter may formally have all the power by necessity, there should be a voluntary eagerness to listen to and defer to other leaders with different gifts.

As Hirsch defines them, the APEST leaders call the church to essentially the same healthy diversity of ministries that Richard Lovelace names as marks of corporate gospel renewal.

	Lovelace	Hirsch
1.	Theological depth	Teachers/Preachers
2.	Anointed worship[21]	Apostles (Prophets/ Teachers)
3.	Rich community	Shepherds
4.	Vigorous evangelism	Evangelists
5.	Doing justice	Prophets

Overall, the APEST teaching is useful for church planters to learn, but it's important to add a few caveats. First, almost no theologian or commentator on Ephesians believes Paul's description of ministry in Ephesians 4:11–13 prescribes how ministry should always be practiced for all time. Rather, Paul *describes* ministry in his time. That can and should be very instructive for us, but we must not apply it too rigidly.

Second, many make the case that the Greek language reads not "shepherds and teachers" but "shepherd-teachers," effectively combining the two categories into one. The exegetical problem with creating two discrete, separate categories here mirrors a concrete reality—namely, that some people combine gifts within themselves. Some individuals may be both a shepherd and an evangelist, for example, or an apostle may be both an apostolic leader and an evangelist.

Last, this approach does not seem to take into consideration the gifts listed in Romans (such as the gifts of administration and management, as well as diaconal gifts). They seem to be omitted in the effort to present the five types of leaders of Ephesians 4:11–13 into a universal model. Note that these caveats are not a denial of the basics of the APEST approach, but an appeal for practitioners to apply it with maximum flexibility.

[20] Alan speaks about APEST in innumerable places, but perhaps the most fulsome treatment is Alan Hirsch, *5Q: Reactivating the Original Intelligence and Capacity of the Body of Christ* (Cody, WY: 100 Movements Publishing, 2017).

[21] It is worth exploring that corporate worship, the sacraments, and leading in worship and prayer—all of which are so important in diverse Protestant traditions—are not addressed much by APEST (at least from what I have read).

HIGHLY ADAPTABLE

Movements usually break away from tradition to try new ideas and methods. They are far more open to innovations, and therefore to risk, than institutions. Within ministry-based movements, these innovations try to adapt the ministry to new conditions, situations, generations, and cultures so they are more effective than previous customary methods. In *The Starfish and the Spirit*, the environment in which innovation and risk are encouraged is marked by relationships where members feel "highly allowed, highly trusted, highly accountable, highly informed, and highly collegial."[22]

The willingness to perform trial and error and to "fail early and often" can sometimes make Christian movements feel like entrepreneurial business start-ups. To be open to change takes a quick decision-making process, which becomes harder to maintain as the movement grows.

REPRODUCIBILITY

This final trait of movements can be easily overlooked. Fast-growing movements can easily and readily convey their vision to those unfamiliar with it. When someone asks, "What is this movement about?" there is an attractive and uncomplicated way to describe the core DNA of the movement—the vision, the values, and the main methods it uses to perform its work. Hirsch and Catchim write, "For an idea to be spreadable, it needs to be simple enough for the audience to understand it … Evangelism, discipleship, leadership formation, ecclesiology itself, and church planting need to be easily reproduced by any serious and committed agent in the system."[23]

Beyond communicating the vision, however, an effective movement must have a way to systematically (that is, in a readily reproducible way) recruit and train new leaders, disciple and transform Christians, and equip congregations in evangelism.[24]

THE DOWNSIDES TO MOVEMENT DYNAMICS

Four of these five movement dynamics can overreach and become imbalanced, causing the dangers of institution-itis described earlier in this paper. As was previously noted, our ministry movements need to have some institutional features, but they shouldn't be too many or too strong. Here are some specific ways that the above characteristics of movements can become skewed.

Vision. Visions for the future need to be specific enough to be inspiring and motivating, but if they are too specific, they come close to telling God what he has to do. And if a time comes when it is clear the vision is not being reached—even if enormous good has been done and enormous

[22] Ford, Wegner, and Hirsch, *The Starfish and the Spirit*, 135–153.

[23] Hirsch and Catchim, *The Permanent Revolution*, 212–213.

[24] Historic examples include the Monastic Movement that won Europe after its rules were standardized; the Reformation that used the printing press, confessions, and catechisms as well as the newly invented academy; and the original Methodist system of bands and classes, of ministers and circuit riders. At the fringes of the church—but influenced by it—is the 12-Step Addiction Recovery program.

progress has been made—it can unfairly saddle the ministry with a sense of failure or a fallen reputation.

Networks. Informal networks are better than formal denominations or church structures for making great strides in ministry. But the downside of networks is the lack of moral and doctrinal accountability. Networks rarely have standards and a process for dealing with complaints, improprieties, and doctrinal deviations the way connectional denominations have. In short, networks are better at carrying "red blood cells" that distribute life-giving oxygen—or new ministry growth—far and wide, but worse at carrying "white blood cells" that prevent infection by regulating doctrinal and moral discipline.

Innovation and risk. As in any other field of endeavor, taking risks can bring both high rewards *and* major failures. It takes great wisdom to know when an innovation is too risky, or when it risks too much of the ministry's money, reputation, and human resources. Wisdom tends to come with age and experience, but older leaders are often less willing to take the great risks that leading a movement requires.

Simplicity and reproducibility. Simplicity is not the same as being simplistic. Leadership training and discipleship must be immersive in order to transform; and the truths being imparted have to be deep and complex enough to carry meaning to all kinds of people in all kinds of cultures. If the vision, values, and beliefs are made too simple, they will be too shallow to change lives or spread across cultural lines.

In light of the dysfunctional traits listed above, we can further identify a list of things that can kill a movement:

- ego-driven leaders (instead of those driven by the glad sacrifice brought about by the gospel);
- losing a clear focus of the mission's basics (instead of maintaining a clear, compelling vision that is easily transferable);
- uninvolved leaders at the top driving decisions of leaders on the ground (instead of shared leadership);
- more commitment to a comfortable routine and the interests of the members than to the mission;
- territorialism, jealousy, or a lack of trust (instead of collaboration);
- an emphasis on methods and practices that forsakes prayer and joy;
- a lack of denominational and ethnic diversity (instead of learning from multiple traditions and including "persons from every tribe and language and people and nation" [Revelation 5:9]).

MARKERS OF A GOSPEL MOVEMENT

In contrast to the list above, here is a list of signs that a gospel movement is taking place.[25]

[25] More information on these signs can be found toward the end of Timothy Keller, *Center Church: Doing Balanced, Gospel-Centered Ministry in Your City* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2012).

Gospel. Gospel-centered congregations possess a dynamic, orthodox theology and integrate it into their lives. This doctrine is based on the gospel and used for renewal.

City. Unlike sectarian churches, churches that are collaborative and humble work with other churches to reach the city evangelistically. They also work with other agencies and residents to make a more livable and just city for all. (This combines the concepts of the Christian worldview, common grace, a servanthood mindset, and contextualization.)

Mission. Christians live intentional, incarnational, Jesus-centered lives as they engage the city. They are agents for the kingdom that use a combination of evangelism, mercy and justice, and faith and work to mitigate the results of sin. Disciples are formed to be in the culture but not of it.

Movement. There are naturally self-propagating networks of new churches in all geographic and social sectors of the city. These networks grow in number and produce the three characteristics above throughout the area.

MARKERS OF A CITY INFLUENCED BY A GOSPEL MOVEMENT

What exactly does an entire city look like when it has been influenced by a gospel movement? It will experience benefits such as these:

- cultural and artistic expressions that honor God and the beauty of his creation;
- humane workplaces and industries;
- less crime and institutional corruption;
- greater expressions of mercy and justice;
- restorative race relations;
- community-minded neighborhoods that enjoy:
  - a more just distribution of power and wealth,
  - peace-filled dialogue amid conflict,
  - compassion and respect for human dignity,
  - growth in philanthropy.

MARKERS OF AN ECOSYSTEM INFLUENCED BY A GOSPEL MOVEMENT

Here, the term "ecosystem" includes a variety of movements, institutions, and organizations that span a wide location. When an entire ecosystem enjoys the renewal of a gospel movement, it can feature traits such as these:

- A prayer movement that unites churches across divisions in visionary intercession for the city.
- A great number of specialized evangelistic ministries, and especially effective campus and youth ministries. Many of the church's future members and leaders are found in the

city's colleges and schools, and so the ecosystem wins the youth of a city who understand the culture well.

- A healthy variety of mercy and justice ministries that address every possible social problem in each neighborhood. Like the evangelicals of the 1830s, there needs to be an urban "benevolent empire" of Christians banding together in various charitable trusts and other voluntary organizations to take on the needs of the city.
- Christians from across the city gathering with others in the same profession. Networks of Christians in business, the media, the arts, government, the academy, and more should come together to help each other work with excellence and Christian distinctiveness.
- Institutions that support family life in the city, especially schools and counseling services.
- Systems for attracting, developing, and training great numbers of urban church and ministry leaders. This usually means good theological education, but a dynamic city leadership system will need to include additional components such as well-developed internship programs and connections to campus ministries.
- An unusual unity among the city's Christian leaders. Church movement leaders, theologians, heads of institutions, business leaders, and others know one another and provide each other with vision and direction for the whole city. They are more concerned with reaching the whole city and growing the whole body of Christ than they are with increasing the size of their own tribe.

Often these citywide movements happen through a few key friendships—maybe comprising two to five people at most—with people who represent the different networks, such as pastors, business leaders, and Christian institutional leaders. Usually, the fellowship within the movement grows outward from that set of friendships, which creates a handful of "inner leaders" who assume responsibility for the movement and usually make sacrifices of time and money to see it through.

When all of these elements are experienced, they stimulate the growth of one another, and the movement becomes self-sustaining to some degree.

MECHANICS FOR MOVEMENTS

"Mechanics" refers to the specific practices that are based on the healthy characteristics of movements detailed earlier and have helped different movements multiply and grow. However, they are not universal for all movements. They are included because they are good illustrations of the principles, and many of the methods may be, with contextualization, useful to readers.

EXPONENTIAL CHURCH PLANTING[26]

Below is a comparison of church-planting practices that are (1) less innovative and less reproducible and (2) more innovative and more reproducible.

Less Innovative and Less Reproducible Church-Planting Practices	More Innovative and More Reproducible Church-Planting Practices
The movement organization fully funds every church plant.	Church planters are trained to raise funds, be bi-vocational, or both.
The movement finds a single planter that can do everything on their own.	The movement relies on church-planting teams rather than one individual at a time.
Seminary training is required prior to planting a church.	Church planters are trained while in the field.
Church plants aim to start large with full worship services, a large congregation that may be taken from a mother church, and an emphasis on evangelism.	Church plants start small with a modestly sized evangelistic community.
Satellite churches are dependent on or controlled by the mother church.	Satellite churches become interdependent and hubs to multiply into more churches. Rather than only starting one church, a multiplying movement is started.

EXPONENTIAL DISCIPLE-MAKING[27]

The key to multiplication in this mechanic is a very specific and robust program of disciple-making. Leadership multiplication and church multiplication are directly dependent on the aspects of discipleship listed below.

- **The outcomes of discipleship**
  - Fruit of the Spirit (supernatural character change)
  - Identification of gifts and calling (clarity on one's mission in the world)
- **The habits or means of discipleship**
  - Discipline in reading Scripture
  - Meditating on God's Word
  - A strong prayer life
  - A commitment to changed behavior
  - Honoring the Sabbath

[26] Based on Steve Addison, *Movements That Change the World* (Nashville: Missional Press, 2009), 112–113.

[27] Based on Ford, Wegner, and Hirsch, *The Starfish and the Spirit*, 170–230.

- **Understanding mission**
  - Personal evangelism and gospel fluency (the ability to articulate the offers of the gospel in ways that address the expressed needs and aspirations of the culture)
  - Pursuing justice and mercy
  - Integrating faith and work
- **The community context**
  - Intimate accountability and deep support for one another
  - A level of affinity with some other congregants (such as same neighborhood, job, or family stage)
  - A missional community where people love each other and live life together
  - Congregation-wide preaching, corporate worship, and sacraments
- **The content of discipleship**
  - The gospel (the Bible, the law, the kingdom-covenant, the Lord's Prayer, Jesus' sacrifice, and so on)
  - Developing a Christian worldview

Two types of discipling movements. Ford, Wegner, and Hirsch speak of two kinds of movements that make disciples. The first are disciple-making movements (DMMs), which take one or two years to transform a new disciple into a disciple-maker.[28] These movements work mainly with "seekers" who have questions about Christianity (and become believers during the process) and newer Christians. DMMs grow very rapidly, as a high percentage of disciples assume the role of disciple-makers. The results are often spectacular, with new house churches and networks generating exponentially. This kind of discipling works directly to produce new converts. Generally, DMMs are not very common in Western cultures where people are not only more skeptical of religion but also more mobile, pressured, and overworked.

The second type are movements of disciple-making (MDMs), which begin with church members and take two to four years to transform a disciple into a disciple-maker. A lower percentage of people become disciple-makers than in the first type of movement, and so its growth is slower. This kind of discipling works indirectly to produce new converts, since Christians are equipped to reach out mainly to their friends and neighbors.

Multiplying disciples. Ford, Wegner, and Hirsch assert that when pastors disciple people who are open to being disciple-makers themselves, the total number of disciples will exponentially increase.[29] For example, if fifty people become disciples and each of them is asked to disciple eight others, this forms a new generation of disciple-makers. If each generation exponentially increases the amount of disciples formed, the original number of fifty disciples will grow into something much larger. Ford and Wegner state that, on average, about 30 percent of the people we disciple

[28] Ibid., 66.

[29] Ibid., 164.

take on the task of disciple-making—a number useful to predict the level of multiplication over the course of the generations of disciple-making.

In the exponential disciple-making mechanic, the leaders are simply those who are the best disciple-makers. The disciple-makers who have retained and trained the most disciples, and who have done so several times, have in many ways trained themselves to be leaders and elders in the church. These individuals naturally make good house leaders, hub leaders, and occasionally network leaders.

Multiplying houses, hubs, and networks. This mechanic also advocates embedding all congregants in weekly small groups, or "micro-churches." As the number of disciples multiplies, they come into these house churches, which then also grow and multiply. When there are enough house churches, "hubs" are formed to serve multiple house churches. These hubs are places where training and deeper Christian instruction take place, but also places where house churches can unite to plan ministry in their neighborhoods.

When enough house churches and hubs are formed, they can become a congregation of many houses and hubs that gather together for worship. They can also become more like an association or presbytery of a number of house churches.

Addendum: Dietrich Schindler on Merging Evangelism and Discipling.[30] In one of his books, Dietrich Schindler describes a method he used when church planting in Germany. First, a single Christian invites two other Christians to start a triad. (Schindler insists the group members must all be the same gender.) Each participant reads the same Bible passage each day. Weekly they come together to share what God has been teaching them and how they have tried to live in accordance with the Christian faith that week.

After two months, they decide to ask a non-Christian to join the group. The non-Christian is asked to join for two weeks before they commit to long-term attendance. After four to six months, the four go out to eat and then divide into two groups of two. Each immediately invites another Christian to create a triad. After two more months, each triad asks a non-Christian to join, and the process continues.

Schindler recommends this for two reasons. First, it does not take a lot of giftedness and training to be in a triad. Second, it incorporates non-believers into Christian community as expected; welcomes participants; and makes evangelism organic, process-oriented, and highly relational.

EXPONENTIAL MISSIONAL COMMUNITIES[31]

This mechanism begins with a core of discipleship—multiple triads totaling around six to nine individuals—that takes place within a missional community of about thirty individuals, which exists to evangelize the members' locale, friends, colleagues, kin, and neighbors. When a

[30] Dietrich Schindler, *Shift: Road to Level 5 Church Multiplication* (Exponential, 2021), chapter 2.

[31] Based on JR Woodward and Dan White Jr., *The Church as Movement: Starting and Sustaining Missional-Incarnational Churches* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2016), 37–39.

missional community grows to thirty people or more, it divides into two communities, ideally within the geographic location of their members. A neighborhood congregation forms after four to five missional communities are established in a location. They can then unite for common worship. Lastly, a network is formed after five or more neighborhood congregations unite to establish training programs and other ministries (such as youth ministry) that benefit from critical mass.

There are two key growth fronts in this mechanism. The first is getting the missional community into real engagement with its outside community so that non-Christians receive hospitality, see thoughtful and service-oriented Christians, and journey toward faith organically. The chapter on incarnational practices in JR Woodward and Dan White Jr.'s book *The Church as Movement* outlines how the missional community connects to its neighborhood and how its webs of relationships are helpful in doing so.[32]

The missional community seeks to understand the culture of its neighborhood or city. What are its narratives? What are the people's dreams and hopes, as well as their fears and nightmares? What do they think about Christianity? What makes them skeptical about it, and what makes it attractive to them? What do they base their identity on? What are their idols, moral norms, primary institutions, and problems that have gone unsolved?

From there, the missional community explores how they can use hospitality to create a community in which non-believers feel safe. They reflect on how to talk about Christianity in a way that best connects with the concerns of those in the neighborhood, as well as how they can mobilize to meet needs in the community with the help of non-Christians.

The second key growth front is getting Christians into the "discipleship core," or the groups of triads mentioned earlier. While the discipleship core is the first step in forming a network, it is not something that is abandoned as the congregation grows. To exponentially grow mission communities, these groups of triads continue to form and grow. One of the main ways to discern if a missional community is large enough to divide and multiply is not purely the size of the community itself but also the size of its discipleship core. Therefore, it is ideal to have as much of the missional community involved in the discipleship core as possible.

One of the tools for discipleship within these triads is adhering to a triangle of practices: Communion (with God), Community (with other Christians), and Co-mission (outreach). Those in the discipleship triad share one concrete practice or discipline in each area that they will engage in for the next six months, such as making use of the psalms in a member's prayer life, meeting with another married couple to read a book on Christian marriage together, or showing increased hospitality to colleagues at work. The members of the triad can keep each other accountable in these endeavors.

This mechanic is a bit reminiscent of John Wesley's practice of "class multiplication." Wesley formed "classes," which were open to all, including non-believers, just as missional communities are. But within these classes were "bands"—deeper discipleship spaces consisting of people

[32] Ibid., 192–215.

who agreed to live according to a more demanding rule of life, including daily prayers, reading, instruction, service, and other disciplines.

EXPONENTIAL PLANTING TEAMS[33]

As described in the DNA paper on church planting, Peyton Jones advises that church planters recruit and train a team of people with a variety of gifts who act as a "strike team" to complement the church planter in a variety of ways and to evangelize. But rather than staying with the church plant permanently, they divide into two teams that train new members and move on to plant another church. Jones writes:

> The goal of utilizing the strike-team approach is to produce sustainable church plants at an ever-increasing rate. Imagine if, instead of five churches launching this year in one city, those five planters launched together in one place, forming a super-team. Imagine also that after the church is stable in … twelve months, the team would split in half, with each team filling out with some newly discipled believers with them. [One team leaves and forms a new church.] Now imagine the process repeating itself twelve months later … Now we will have three solid church plants in three years.[34]

Jones adds that the original church might do the same thing again, creating even more than three churches in three years.

The vision, concepts, and models above help us consider how movements can play a substantial role in sharing the gospel, renewing our cities, and acting as a foretaste of God's kingdom. City to City's hope is that such movements will take place in cities across the world. We pray and work so that the trend of stagnant or declining churches may one day be reversed into an exciting new reality of growth, flourishing, and multiplication. Such a vision seems difficult to achieve—at times, impossible—but with God's faithful mercy and wisdom, the Holy Spirit's guidance, the example of Jesus Christ's mission in the world, and widespread collaboration among the global body of believers, there is no doubt it is possible.

As I mention in my book *How to Reach the West Again,* everything is unprecedented once:

> Up until 1900, there had never been a fast-growing revival in a non-Western pre-Christian country. Then there was the Korean Presbyterian revival in 1907 and the East African Anglican revival in the 1930s. There was never a renewal movement of monasticism until there was. There was never a Reformation until there was. There

[33] Peyton Jones, *Church Plantology: The Art and Science of Planting Churches* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2021), 129.
[34] Ibid.

never was anything like a Great Awakening until there was. There has never been a fast-growing revival in a post-Christian, secular society. But every great new thing is unprecedented—until it happens. Jesus said, "I will build my church, and the gates of hell will not prevail against it" (Matthew 16:18). There's no reason to believe this promise has an expiration date.[35]

[35] Timothy Keller, *How to Reach the West Again: Six Essential Elements of a Missionary Encounter* (New York: Redeemer City to City, 2020), 57.

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About the Author

TIMOTHY KELLER was the chairman of Redeemer City to City and the founding pastor of Redeemer Presbyterian Church in Manhattan, which he started in 1989 with his wife, Kathy, and three young sons. For over 25 years, he led a diverse congregation of urban professionals that grew to a weekly attendance of over 5,000. After stepping down as senior pastor of Redeemer in July of 2017, he continued to serve City to City, a ministry that has helped start more than 1,000 churches in over 150 cities and equipped more than 79,000 leaders. Tim authored numerous books, with some of the best known being *The Reason for God, The Prodigal God,* and *The Meaning of Marriage,* which he co-authored with Kathy. Overall, God allowed him to author 31 books that have sold over 6 million copies and have been translated into 29 languages.

Gospel-Centered City Ministry: The City to City DNA aims to cultivate a deeper understanding of the core values of Redeemer City to City. In eighteen white papers, organization founder Timothy Keller elaborates on five key concepts—gospel, culture, city, mission, and movement—that motivate City to City's work of planting churches, engaging culture, and catalyzing movement around the world.

City to City's hope is that church leaders across the globe will evaluate these DNA principles, dialogue with others about how they can be contextualized for ministry in their cities, and work together to serve a greater gospel movement. Through robust discussions with Christians around the world, we can collectively have a stronger grasp on the biblical principles found within the DNA outlined here and pass it on to the church of tomorrow.

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