

The Plumb Line

A Teaching Ministry of Fellowship Bible Church



Pauline Studies – Part IV

The Church in the World

Summer/Fall 2023

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Lesson 1 – The Future of the Present

Text: Ephesians 4:1 – 16

“What you believe about the ultimate future has considerable impact on your view of the church’s mission.”
(N. T. Wright)

It has been roughly two thousand years since our Lord was crucified and buried, raised on the third day, and ascended into heaven. Throughout that time there have been the mockers noted by Jesus’ leading apostle, Peter, who say, *“Where is the promise of His coming? For since the fathers fell asleep, all things continue as they were from the beginning of creation.”*¹ The Church has attempted to answer this question in many and varied ways, ranging between monastic escapism to incorporative imperialism. No settled approach to the ‘mission’ of the Christian Church has ever been hit upon and adopted universally across all communions, and certainly this study is not likely to bring about that miraculous phenomenon any more than the myriad of other theories. Rather the emphasis of this study is to attempt to glean from the letters of the Apostle Paul just what the Holy Spirit inspired him to say and write to the early Church – and in our opinion the Church of every generation – regarding its *purpose* and *goal* in the world.



John Winthrop (1587-1649)

The previous studies in this series of Pauline theology have established, hopefully beyond reasonable disagreement, that Paul was not in conflict with Jesus Christ on any matter pertaining to the being and the life of the Church (or on any other matter, for that). Thus we can presuppose that what the apostle has to say concerning the life of the Church in the world will align with Jesus’ admonition to be *salt, light, leaven*, and *“a city set upon a hill.”* This last expression was famously chosen by John Winthrop, the fre-

¹ II Peter 3:4

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quent governor of the Massachusetts Bay Colony, as his challenge to the Puritan immigrant community in Massachusetts, to establish a community there that would be a powerful witness to the watching world. What is remarkable about Winthrop's speech is its consonance with Paul's constant admonition to the churches under his charge for *unity* and *purity* of life as a unique community. The opening sections of Winthrop's essay clearly echo the Pauline literature, though, of course, in King James English,

Now the onely way to avoyde this shipwracke, and to provide for our posterity, is to followe the counsell of Micah, to doe justly, to love mercy, to walk humbly with our God. For this end, wee must be knitt together, in this worke, as one man. Wee must entertaine each other in brotherly affection. Wee must be willing to abridge ourselves of our superfluties, for the supply of other's necessities. Wee must uphold a familiar commerce together in all meekeness, gentlenes, patience and liberality. Wee must delight in each other; make other's conditions our oune; rejoyce together, mourne together, labour and suffer together, allwayes haueing before our eyes our commission and community in the worke, as members of the same body. Soe shall wee keepe the unitie of the spirit in the bond of peace. The Lord will be our God, and delight to dwell among us, as his oune people, and will command a blessing upon us in all our wayes. Soe that wee shall see much more of his wisdome, power, goodness and truthe, than formerly wee have been acquainted with. Wee shall finde that the God of Israell is among us, when ten of us shall be able to resist a thousand of our enemies; when hee shall make us a prayse and glory that men shall say of succeeding plantations, "the Lord make it like that of New England." For wee must consider that wee shall be as a city upon a hill. The eies of all people are upon us.²

The idea of a city set upon a hill is one of *visibility* and *safety*. In the ancient world, travel was arduous and dangerous, and the traveler sought refuge in a village or city, if possible, before nightfall. To be caught out on the roads after dark was to risk robbery and death at the hands of brigands and 'highwaymen.' It was, therefore, a truly comforting sight for the weary traveler to round a bend in the road, late in the day, and see a city set upon a hill before him. Significant to the comparison of the Church of Jesus Christ to such a city is that the city itself did not descend from the hill to meet the

² Winthrop, John "A City on a Hill" (1630); [Winthrop's City upon a Hill.pdf \(gilderlehrman.org\)](#). Accessed 02July2023.

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traveler; rather, the traveler could see the city from afar (the significance of its being ‘set upon a hill’) and use this great visibility to find his way to safety.

But this is not the vision of the purpose of the Church in the modern Western evangelical tradition. Indeed, from the Middle Ages to the present the concept of the ‘Church in the World’ has oscillated from *isolation* to *intervention*, with monasticism, cloisterism, and other associated philosophies vying generation-to-generation with social and political activism. The unifying principle that ties the various perspectives together is that none of them can be supported from the Pauline corpus, yet all of them can find passages therein for their own defense. Counterintuitively, at least in the modern mind, the root cause of error in the various and divergent perspectives of the purpose of the Church in the world is not to be found in Soteriology as much as in Eschatology. Thus N. T. Wright comments, “What you believe about the ultimate future has considerable impact on your view of the church’s mission.”³ Historically, the various ways in which the Church has interacted (or not) with the surrounding culture has de-



Leslie Newbigin (1909-98)

has developed implicitly from its Eschatology, its view of what God is doing (or not doing) in the world at the present time, and how it all is going to end. Leslie Newbigin, in the second lecture of his excellent *Signs Amid the Rubble*, outlines the two basic eschatological approaches at least of the modern Church. The first might be called the *triumphalist* view, in which, “this world is going to be gradually subdued by the Spirit of Christ, working through His servants, until at last God’s rule is complete and perfect.”⁴ This view is also known as *Christian Reconstructionism* and has been influential among the ‘Christian Right.’ As the latter phrase signifies, this view is *interventionist* in its methodology, particularly in regard to political activism. The goal is to bring the whole world under the authority of Jesus Christ through legisla-

³ N. T. Wright, “Paul and Missional Hermeneutics” in Scot McKnight & Joseph B. Modica; ed. *The Apostle Paul and the Christian Life* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic; 2016); 180.

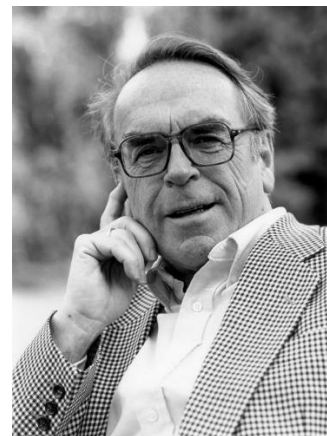
⁴ Newbigin, Leslie *Signs Amid the Rubble* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co.; 2003); 19.

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tive action. Closely associated with this view is that of Theonomy, the perspective that holds that the biblical Torah is still binding upon all of mankind and should be actively promulgated in modern legislative bodies and laws. Some recent and influential advocates of this perspective are Rousas Rushdoony, Greg Bahnsen, and Gary North.

Newbigin describes the second primary view among many modern evangelicals as “the view that the true object of hope for a Christian is a state of being beyond death, in which he will share with the whole communion of saints in the eternal bliss of the vision of God.”⁵ There is nothing that can be done either for or in this present age except to attempt to ‘save’ as many sinners as possible ahead of the cataclysmic finale, most often referred to as the Great Tribulation. As this would indicate, this perspective is most influential among Dispensational churches and teachings, as it indicates an essentially-complete disassociation between the current ‘Church Age’ and the biblical world of the Old Testament. This is the eschatology behind the common evangelistic question, “If you were to die tonight, do you know if you would go to heaven?” Newbigin continues, “According to this view, earth and earthly life are essentially a place of training and testing by which the individual is prepared for the higher life beyond. Hope is not centered at all on this vale of tears where we spend our little span of years, but upon our true home in heaven to which we go when our time of conflict and testing is successfully passed.”⁶

These perspectives of the meaning of the Christian Life, or the purpose of the Church in the World, are obviously diametrically opposed, but they do share a common theme. That is, that Eschatology is essentially an entirely-future concern and has little role to play in the present world and life of the Church. This is where these two perspectives, and other similar across the ages, diverge most significantly and fatally from the view of Paul himself. Jürgen Moltmann,



Jürgen Moltmann (b. 1926)

⁵ *Idem.*

⁶ *Ibid.*; 19-20.

points out that this moving of the Scriptural teaching of the ‘last things’ both to the end of the age as well as the end of most Protestant Systematic Theologies, “robbed them of their directive, uplifting and critical significance for all the days which are spent here, this side of the end, in history.”⁷ But we have seen in our earlier studies that, for the Apostle Paul, Eschatology was and is a present reality and not merely the ‘last chapter’ of the story. Again Moltmann, “In actual fact, however, eschatology means the doctrine of the Christian hope, which embraces both the object hoped for and also the hope inspired by it. From first to last, and not merely in the epilogue, Christianity is eschatology, is hope...the eschatological outlook is characteristic of all Christian proclamation, of every Christian existence and of the whole Church.”⁸

In relation, then, to the two perspectives outlined by Newbigin, what does an eschatological perspective on the Church’s mission look like? On the one hand, the Dispensationalist view has few if any points of contact with the Pauline, since in this perspective the current ‘Church Age’ has little to do with the covenantal promises of God from the Old Testament, nor with the anticipated future when God again deals directly with His people Israel. The Kingdom is future, not present, and the ‘blessed hope’ for the Dispensationalist is the return of the Lord via the Rapture, when the Church will be removed from the scene of ‘last things.’ For this reason, among others, Dispensationalism has struggled to develop a consistent and biblical ‘meaning’ for the Church except as a place where people come to hear the Gospel and be saved. To be sure, within the Christian community of local churches there is an emphasis on discipleship, on sanctification, on moral purity, etc.; but there is very little within Dispensationalist teaching that sets forth what the Church is to be *in the world*. But this lack is due to a massive oversight, the fact that “the central proclamation of the New Testament is that in Christ the new age has already dawned.”⁹

That would seem to leave the other perspective, that of Christian Reconstructionism. But one is as hard pressed to find *intervention* in Paul’s writings as *isolation*.

⁷ Moltmann, Jürgen *Theology of Hope* (San Francisco: Harper San Francisco; 1967); 15.

⁸ *Ibid.*; 16.

⁹ Newbigin; 27.

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There is no mention of the Church bringing in the Kingdom through ecclesiastical or political or social activities, all of which are components of every individual believer's life. Indeed, the Church itself cannot and must not avoid interacting with the surrounding culture, often in one or more of these areas. But, as Newbigin summarizes, "It is neither to an otherworldly heaven, nor to a gradual improvement of earth that the New Testament looks forward, but to a divine act by which all created things are to be renewed. The Kingdom of God is to come down out of heaven so that God's will is done in the whole domain of earth as it is now done in heaven."¹⁰ In opposition to either traditional view, Paul strikes a balance between *isolation* (which he calls 'separation') and *intervention* (more biblically termed as 'witness') by comprehensively developing the theology of the new creation people of God in the risen Christ Jesus. And that which ties all of this together for the apostle is the presence, both in the individual believer and in the Church, of the Holy Spirit, the One who invades this age with the power of the age to come.

No assessment of Paul's teachings, on any topic whatsoever, can be complete – or even accurate – without including his perspective on the Person and Work of the Holy Spirit. Traditional evangelicalism relegates the Spirit's work to that of the individual believer's sanctification and to the 'unction' of the preacher. Very little is said, however, concerning the Spirit as evidence of the advent of the coming age into the present, a major theme in the Pauline literature. Timothy Gombis writes, "the Spirit is the eschatological presence of God that had been promised by the prophets – the very presence of God's life-giving Spirit poured out on God's people in the coming age. That eschatological age has arrived, then, in the church and in individual churches. The Spirit animates and brings to God's people the life of the future coming age."¹¹

But for Paul this work of the Holy Spirit as the advance force of the coming age is far less individual than it is corporate, a fact almost completely lost in modern Western evangelicalism. We have seen how the *charismata* – the 'spiritual gifts' – have been indi-

¹⁰ *Ibid.*; 28.

¹¹ Timothy G. Gombis, "Participation in the New-Creation People of God in Christ by the Spirit" in *The Apostle Paul and the Christian Life*; 111.

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vidualized within the Pentecostal and charismatic movements, and largely ignored within more conservative evangelical communions. This in spite of Paul's teaching that the administration of the 'grace gifts' is wholly under the sovereign superintendence of the Holy Spirit, and entirely for the edification of the body of Christ, the church. But individualism is the *zeitgeist* of the western world – particularly the United States – and this spirit of the age has massively penetrated the community of faith. This is critically important, however, as this individualizing of the Holy Spirit's ministry also individualizes 'ethics' and the 'meaning' of being a Christian in the present age – all to the detriment of the purpose of the Church itself. "It is a modern illusion that we have something called 'Christian ethics' that each person can 'live out' on her or his own. Paul does not envision individuals making 'choices' with reference to their own behavior abstracted from a communal context."¹²

Both missional perspectives outlined above have the tendency to minimize the Church (and, consequently, the local church). The *interventionist* perspective tends, in its modern variation, to view the congregation as a voting bloc, to be directed from the pulpit as to how to utilize the 'God-given responsibility' of voting for the furtherance of the Kingdom. The *isolationist* perspective tends to emphasize personal discipleship and holiness with very little substantive ecclesiology at all. If the Church is 'Plan B,' then there really is not much to say for it or about it. Both of these views are diametrically opposed to Paul's perspective, as his letters focus an undeniable lens on the Church and the churches, to a much greater extent even than to the individual. Thus it should be noted here in the introductory chapter of this lesson, that one cannot really discuss the purpose of the Church in the World from a Pauline perspective, until one has thoroughly imbibed Paul's perspective on the Church itself. That we have attempted to do in the three previous series; we must take it as given here that the Church – and individual congregations to which Paul wrote his letters – form the center from which both the Gospel and the plan of God for its advancement move concentrically outward. To be sure, the churches are made up of individuals and individuals matter, but they matter

¹² *Ibid.*; 114.

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as ‘members’ of the whole, as ‘joints and ligaments’ functioning toward the building up of the whole body. Therefore this final series in our Pauline Studies track will not emphasize personal or individual ethics except inasmuch as the individual believer functions under the gifting of the Holy Spirit toward mutual edification of the congregation.

To return to the ‘City upon a Hill’ metaphor, the congregations of faith in Jesus Christ - regardless of denomination so long as true faith abides - are to be *clearly seen from a distance* as being a place of safe haven. The other metaphors that Christ uses in describing the life of His disciples in the world, are divided in their application between ‘manifest’ and ‘hidden,’ and this is an instructive guideline for analyzing what Paul has to say on the matter. *Light*, for instance, is manifest and not hidden, for “*one does not light a candle and then place it under a bushel basket*”¹³ but rather places it strategically in order to maximize its impact on the darkness. *Salt*, however, and *leaven* are applied on and into that which they are intended to impact: salt acting as a preservative for meat, and leaven hidden in the dough to exercise its pervasive power, “*a little leaven leavens the whole lump.*”¹⁴ These metaphors, then, provide a dual path of consideration regarding the Church in the World - both clearly visible as a Light or City upon a Hill, and working in the midst of each generation as salt and leaven.

The problem with the two interactive paradigms - *isolationist* and *interventionist* - is that each emphasizes one aspect of the metaphorical milieu to the exclusion of the other. Interventionism is all about *salt* and *leaven* but gets too deep in the trenches of ‘*this present darkness*’ that a clear distinction between the Church and the world is obscured. The isolationist view, on the other hand, often establishes a congregational dynamic - often termed ‘legalism’ - whereby believers are prohibited from interacting with ‘worldly’ venues like restaurants that serve alcohol, movie theaters, etc. A pious self-righteousness often develops, sadly also often coupled with denominational prejudice as well as social and racial prejudice, making the City upon the Hill a distinctly uninvit-

¹³ Mark 4:21

¹⁴ I Corinthians 5:6

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ing place. From a purely historical viewpoint, the New England Puritan colony was a sad example of this dangerous and self-defeating tendency.

Into this conundrum we find Paul's teaching to be both clarifying and challenging. To Paul, the inaugurated eschatology evident both in the Resurrection of Jesus Christ and the Outpouring of the Holy Spirit establishes the entire framework in which he works out the meaning and purpose of the Church in the present age, this age-between-the-ages. The key to understanding Paul's missiology – his *purpose* for the Church in this age – is to understand his *inaugurated eschatology* – the fact that the Age to Come has already come, and the New Creation has begun through the Resurrected life of Jesus Christ. This unending and overcoming life is now conveyed to all who are in Christ through the indwelling of the Holy Spirit, constituting believers, the Church, as a New Humanity living the future hope in the present age. Far from being 'sinners saved by grace just waiting for the great by-and-by,' the Church in Paul's estimation is a powerful force of future grace and light in the midst of present sin and darkness. Foremost among the responsibilities of this newly-constituted humanity is the *ministry of reconciliation*, which will be a major topic throughout this study. But Paul makes clear the context of this reconciliation is the advent of the future age, the New Creation, and not merely getting folks to heaven when they die.

Therefore, from now on, we regard no one according to the flesh. Even though we have known Christ according to the flesh, yet now we know Him thus no longer. Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; old things have passed away; behold, all things have become new. Now all things are of God, who has reconciled us to Himself through Jesus Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation, that is, that God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself, not imputing their trespasses to them, and has committed to us the word of reconciliation.
(II Corinthians 5:16-19)

Timothy Gombis writes in reference to this and other Pauline passages, "The identity of God's people is that they are the new-creation people of God – that eschatological reality for which the people of God had been looking. The church participates by

the Spirit in the new humanity.”¹⁵ Essential to our understanding of Paul’s mission for the Church is the constitution of God’s people in Christ as the ‘new man.’ This new man concept applies preeminently in Jesus as the Last Adam, but Paul usage of the phrase references not Jesus, but all who are in Him, who are constituted within His resurrected life as the new people of God, the new humanity. Paul is at pains in several of his letters to show how this newly constituted “*one new man*” is not only the fulfillment of all that God had promised from Genesis 3:15 onward, but also encompasses the entirety of mankind – Jew *and* Gentile.

*For He Himself is our peace, who has made both one, and has broken down the middle wall of separation, having abolished in His flesh the enmity, that is, the law of commandments contained in ordinances, so as to create in Himself **one new man** from the two, thus making peace, and that He might reconcile them both to God in one body through the cross, thereby putting to death the enmity.* (Ephesians 2:14-16)

We may consider it this way, in keeping with the overall thrust of Paul’s writings, that the Risen Christ constitutes both the Last and the New Adam, the progenitor, as it were, of a new humanity. This new humanity – His Body, the Church – occupies the new creation that is inaugurated by His Resurrection and the giving of the Holy Spirit. There are lines of connection both between the Holy Spirit hovering and brooding over the deep in Genesis 1 and the Spirit being poured out on believers at Pentecost. There are also lines of connection between the *Shekinah* presence of God’s Spirit in both the tabernacle and the first Temple, and the same event at Pentecost. Both Creation and Covenant are included in Paul’s vision and description of what God has done in Christ Jesus to ‘create’ a new humanity to inhabit a new creation.

Paul’s conception of what Jesus accomplished through His death and resurrection is far different from most modern evangelical, and especially Dispensational, perspectives. The latter tend to limit Jesus’ accomplishment to either having saved His elect through His atoning work, or having made salvation *possible* through His death for those who choose to believe. But Paul speaks of victory over the rulers and powers and

¹⁵ *The Apostle Paul and the Christian Life*; 111.

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principalities; he speaks of new creation Jesus as the “*head over all things*”; he speaks of Christ reigning “*until He has put all His enemies under His feet.*” And he speaks of all these things in the present and continuing tense, not solely in the future. Perhaps the most consistent feature in the apostle’s description of the finished work of Christ is His exaltation and the correspondence of that exaltation to Jesus’ *present* dominion over the universe.¹⁶ The most famous of examples is the hymn of exaltation in Philippians 2, but parallels to that can be found in Ephesians and Colossians. Consider the harmony of meaning that Paul draws between these, and the manner in which he ties the Church’s life in the world directly to the current exalted reign of her Lord Jesus Christ.

And being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself and became obedient to the point of death, even the death of the cross. Therefore God also has highly exalted Him and given Him the name which is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, of those in heaven, and of those on earth, and of those under the earth, and that every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father. Therefore, my beloved, as you have always obeyed, not as in my presence only, but now much more in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling; for it is God who works in you both to will and to do for His good pleasure. Do all things without complaining and disputing, that you may become blameless and harmless, children of God without fault in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation, among whom you shine as lights in the world, holding fast the word of life, so that I may rejoice in the day of Christ that I have not run in vain or labored in vain.

(Philippians 2:8-16)

... and what is the exceeding greatness of His power toward us who believe, according to the working of His mighty power which He worked in Christ when He raised Him from the dead and seated Him at His right hand in the heavenly places, far above all principality and power and might and dominion, and every name that is named, not only in this age but also in that which is to come. And He put all things under His feet, and gave Him to be head over all things to the church, which is His body, the fullness of Him who fills all in all.

(Ephesians 1:19-23)

He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation. For by Him all things were created that are in heaven and that are on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or principalities or powers. All things were created through Him and for Him. And He is before all things, and in Him all things consist. And He is the head of the body, the church,

¹⁶ This is, of course, fully in agreement with what Jesus said after His resurrection: “*All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth...*” Remarkably, this prelude to the ‘Great Commission’ is rarely acknowledged in modern Western evangelism.

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who is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, that in all things He may have the preeminence. For it pleased the Father that in Him all the fullness should dwell, and by Him to reconcile all things to Himself, by Him, whether things on earth or things in heaven, having made peace through the blood of His cross. (Colossians 1:15-20)

Note the intertwining themes of Jesus' exaltation through death and resurrection, reconciliation, and the role of the Church as His body, "*the fulness of Him who fills all in all.*" Especially note in the Colossians passage how Paul weaves together Creation with New Creation, speaking first of Jesus as "*the firstborn over all creation*" and then as "*the firstborn from the dead.*" And Paul does not speak of these things as happening sometime in the future, during a 'millennial reign' of Christ on earth, but rather as *having been accomplished* through the work Jesus has already finished through the Cross and the grave. All three passages tie the exaltation of the resurrected Jesus Christ with the Church, grounding both its identity – *the fulness of Him who fills all in all* – and its purpose – *children of God without fault in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation...shine as lights in the world* in the effect of the Resurrection and Exaltation of Jesus. There is no thought here that the Church was to find its own way, to figure out what to do on its own. Rather, to Paul, the outpoured Holy Spirit brings the resurrection life of Jesus to His Church, animating and guiding it even more than the pillar of fire and cloud led Israel in the wilderness.

Indeed, many commentators have noted the Exodus framework in the way Paul develops his doctrine of the Church as to her identity and purpose. Believers in community are the new people of God, the New Israel, as well as the New Humanity (hence *both* the Covenantal and the Creational perspectives in Paul). Just as the Israelites *had been* delivered from bondage in Egypt, and *had not yet* arrived in the Promised Land, so also the pattern of Pauline ecclesiology possesses the clear *now* and *not yet* motif throughout. And just as God guided the community of His people through wilderness by His Spirit, so He in the same manner (and in the same divine Person) guides the Church through the current 'in-between age.' Thus the Exodus motif underlies much of Paul's theology of the Church, and nowhere so evidently as in I Corinthians 10,

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Moreover, brethren, I do not want you to be unaware that all our fathers were under the cloud, all passed through the sea, all were baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea, all ate the same spiritual food, and all drank the same spiritual drink. For they drank of that spiritual Rock that followed them, and that Rock was Christ. But with most of them God was not well pleased, for their bodies were scattered in the wilderness. Now these things became our examples, to the intent that we should not lust after evil things as they also lusted. And do not become idolaters as were some of them. As it is written, "The people sat down to eat and drink, and rose up to play." Nor let us commit sexual immorality, as some of them did, and in one day twenty-three thousand fell; nor let us tempt Christ, as some of them also tempted, and were destroyed by serpents; nor complain, as some of them also complained, and were destroyed by the destroyer. Now all these things happened to them as examples, and they were written for our admonition, upon whom the ends of the ages have come. (I Corinthians 10:1-11)

"Written for our example...upon whom the ends of the ages have come." Paul's perspective on the Church's identity and purpose does not look forward to some unfinished work that God must do during the Tribulation or Millennium, but rather it looks back to the fulfilled eschatology of Israel in her Messiah Jesus. But just as Israel was set in the middle of the ancient Near Eastern world, to be a witness of her God's power and grace, so the Church is set in the midst of both world and culture, also to witness to the consummated grace of God in the Cross and the empty tomb. "The church exists as sign and foretaste of the gift that is promised; in all its members it is called to act now in the light of the promised future: that is its proper this-worldliness."¹⁷

Thus the two options – as it has seemed – of either *intervention* or *isolation* both fail to ground their perspective in what Paul understands to be the representative community of the New Creation – the future of the present – the Church. In this reality there can be no thought of isolation, though there must be *separation*. And as history has proven time and time again, intervention does not work, but there must be *proclamation*. "It is only in the church that the true other-worldliness of the gospel is held together with its true this-worldliness. For the church is that body which has Jesus as its only head, and it is in Jesus that the Kingdom is present."¹⁸

¹⁷ Newbigin; 106.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*; 104.

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Dispensationalism offers a false view of the Church due, in measure, to its failure to realize and accept the biblical understanding that the Kingdom *has come and remains*, though not in its fullest form. By pushing the Kingdom off into the far-distant future, the Dispensationalist has denuded the present age – what Paul refers to as “*the end of the ages*” – of any meaning or content. All that is left of the Church is a place for believers to go and be with other believers, listen to a choir and hear a sermon, til they die ‘and go to heaven.’ It is really hard to read this understanding of the Church’s mission in the present age out of what Paul writes.

But the Reconstructionist has it wrong as well, since Paul never holds out the least hope that the current age will be ‘reclaimed’ or otherwise perfected through the action of the community of believers in its midst. Indeed, Paul understands that “*the form of this world is passing away.*”¹⁹ “The earthly ministry of Jesus is not the launching of a movement which will gradually transform the world into the Kingdom of God. It is, rather, a showing forth, within the confines of the present age, of the reality which constitutes the age to come – the reality of God’s reign.”²⁰ Israel was to show forth the reality of God’s immanent grace in their midst, not to bring about wholesale change within the various contemporary empires. *Witness* was never merely doctrinal, but intensely practical, as Israel lived out the divine grace that rescued her from bondage and constituted her a unique people, a people of God’s own possession.

Surely I have taught you statutes and judgments, just as the LORD my God commanded me, that you should act according to them in the land which you go to possess. Therefore be careful to observe them; for this is your wisdom and your understanding in the sight of the peoples who will hear all these statutes, and say, ‘Surely this great nation is a wise and understanding people.’ For what great nation is there that has God so near to it, as the LORD our God is to us, for whatever reason we may call upon Him? And what great nation is there that has such statutes and righteous judgments as are in all this law which I set before you this day?

(Deuteronomy 4:5-8)

¹⁹ I Corinthians 7:31

²⁰ Newbiggin; 102.

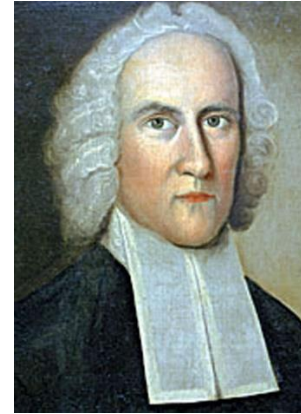
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Paul's understanding of the New Covenant people of God does not divorce itself from the Old Covenant people of God. Rather his language regarding the identity and purpose or mission of the Church resonates with Moses' words here in Deuteronomy concerning the identity and purpose of ancient Israel. Furthermore, as this mandate to Israel was never abrogated, Paul sees its fulfillment in the one true Israelite, the one in whom all Israel was distilled, as it were: the Messiah Jesus. This understanding thus links the many 'in Christ' and 'in Him' passages with the parallel consideration of Gentiles being 'grafted in' to Israel, or Israel and the Gentile nations being made 'one new man.' This much is widely recognized among modern scholars, at least in terms of the advent of the Church as Christ's Body and as the New Covenant people of God. What is often overlooked, however, is connecting the *mission* of Old Covenant Israel to the *mission* of the New Covenant Church. The advent of the Church is not the *terminus ad quem* – the final goal – of the coming of Israel's Messiah. It is rather the *terminus ad quo* – the beginning of the New Creation as well as the New Covenant, now to be lived by the power of the Holy Spirit, the same power that raised Christ Jesus from the dead and inaugurated this New Creation. Recognizing and accepting the Church as the New Creation's New Humanity, the new People of God in the midst of each and every *crooked and perverse generation*, cannot help but put both the identity and the purpose of the Church in a new light. Hopefully, a very biblical and Pauline light.

Lesson 2 – The Culture Challenge
Text: Philippians 2:5 – 16

“I contend that the dominant way of thinking about culture and cultural change are flawed, for they are based on both specious social science and problematic theology.”
(James Davison Hunter)

On July 8, 1741, Congregational pastor/theologian Jonathan Edwards preached perhaps the most famous – or infamous, depending on one’s perspective – sermons ever delivered: *Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God*. It was not the first time Edwards had preached this sermon, but this particular delivery in Enfield, Connecticut was unusually powerful in its effect, and its deliver that day is widely considered to be the starting point of the First Great Awakening



Jonathan Edwards (1703-58)

in the American colonies. The phenomenon that came to have that title had begun several years earlier under the ministry of George Whitefield and the Wesley brothers, John and Charles, back in England.

But it was Edwards who would take up his pen afterward to fully describe and defend what had happened. Edwards viewed the whole as a sincere and authentic work of God through His Holy Spirit, against many within the established church who decried the excesses and ‘enthusiasm’ of the revival and condemned the whole in the lump. Edwards wrote two lengthy treatises (he rarely wrote anything that was not ‘lengthy’): “A Faithful Narrative of the Surprising Work of God” and “Thoughts on Revival.” In these treatises Edwards applied his scientific mind alongside his theologian/pastor’s heart to honestly assess the events, including the bad with the good and admitting errors without condemning the whole because of them. The two treatises read somewhat like a diary of events, including both the experiences of individuals as well as Edwards’ own theological and pastoral assessment of those experiences. Together, “A Faithful Narrative” and “Thoughts on Revival” have become the standard

text among Reformed evangelicals with regard to the nature of true revival, being in summary what Edwards calls “This remarkable *pouring out of the Spirit of God.*”²¹

One of the notable features in Edwards’ description of the revival in New England is the effect evidenced on people’s attitude toward religion with respect to their other, more ‘worldly’ occupations. Edwards writes, for instance, “Presently upon this, a great and earnest concern about the great things of religion, and the eternal world, became *universal* in all parts of the town, and among persons of all degrees, and all ages. The noise amongst the *dry bones* waxed louder and louder...the *temptation* now seemed to lie on that hand, to *neglect* worldly affairs too much, and to spend too much time in the immediate exercise of religion.”²² Places of ‘ill repute’ such as taverns and gaming rooms closed down due to lack of customers and not as a result of any legislative action by the town leaders.

These awakenings when they have first seized on persons, have had two effects; *one* was, that they have brought them immediately to quite their sinful practices; and the looser sort have been brought to forsake and dread their former vices and extravagancies. When once the Spirit of God began to be so wonderfully poured out in a general way through the town, people had soon done with their old quarrels, backbitings, and intermeddling with other men’s matters. The tavern was soon left empty, and persons kept very much at home; none went abroad unless on necessary business, or on some religious account, and every day seemed in many respects like a Sabbath-day.²³

As noted above, Edwards’ account of the revival of the mid-18th Century has become standard reading among the Reformed, and prayer is often lifted up in Reformed congregations for further such outpourings of God’s Spirit upon His people and this land. But it must be noted that the First Great Awakening did not last, and that at its passing the general tenor of colonial culture was left largely unchanged. The same was true, of course, back in Great Britain. Remarkable as the event was while it lasted, its passing left very little mark. Sadly, this has been the uniform testimony of history: the

²¹ Edwards, Jonathan *The Works of Jonathan Edwards; Volume One* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust; 1995); 349. Italics original.

²² *Ibid.*; 348. Italics original.

²³ *Ibid.*; 351. Italics original.

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spread of Christianity has had momentous impact at various times over the past two thousand years, but the lasting impact on culture is much harder to gauge. By and large, societies regress downward after reaching a peak (or perhaps peaks), and the im-



James Davison Hunter (b. 1955)

impact of religious revival – presuming here the *Christian* religion – has been far less than hoped and expected. James Davison Hunter, in his excellent social survey *To Change the World*, concludes simply, “What this overview teaches is that cultures are profoundly resistant to intentional change – period.”²⁴ This is a significant realization, because the church of Jesus Christ in all its various manifestations throughout the ages, has intensely tried to change

the culture in which it existed. Indeed, it can be reasonably concluded that culture change has been viewed as the *raison d’être* of Christianity in its institutional forms both from ancient times and, if possible more intensely, today. Hunter points out in the introductory portion of his book, that while monasticism and cloisterism have undoubtedly been a significant strain of Christian life-in-this-world, they have always been distinctly minority views and activities. “As a rule, though, indifference toward the world is quite rare in the history of God’s people.”²⁵ The title of Hunter’s book should make it obvious that he does not advocate giving up the effort, but rather redefining it in more realistic – both sociologically and theologically – terms. “I contend that the dominant ways of thinking about culture and cultural change are flawed, for they are based on both specious social science and problematic theology.”²⁶

Perhaps the most powerful single work in recent times dealing with the relationship between the Church – meaning the aggregate of denominations professing, preaching, and propagating Christianity – and the surrounding culture is Richard Niebuhr’s *Christ & Culture* from 1951. Niebuhr’s work did not and has not met with universal agreement, yet it seems to have set the stage for discussion for the decades since its pub-

²⁴ Hunter, James Davison *To Change the World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press; 2010); 45.

²⁵ *Ibid.*; 4.

²⁶ *Ibid.*; 5.

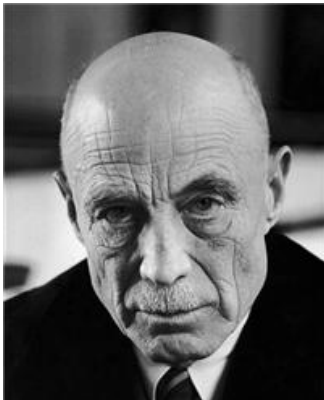
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lication. In recognition of the work's abiding impact, D. A. Carson published a summary and critique titled *Christ & Culture Revisited*. Both books are helpful not so much in directing which path the Church should take *vis-à-vis* her surrounding culture (indeed, Carson somewhat disparages the attempt) but rather as useful historical summary of the various ways in which Christianity has sought over the years to 'change' culture. Considering culture's resilience and resistance to change, such a historical overview may serve as a useful reminder of what *not* to do in the future. However, it may prove harder to change the Church's desire and effort to change culture, than it is to actually change culture itself. Agreeing with Carson's summary assessment that "It is hard to overestimate the influence of Niebuhr's fivefold template, especially in the English-speaking world,"²⁷ let us again remind ourselves of that template before digging in to what we propose to be the Pauline response.



D. A. Carson (b. 1946)

Christ Against Culture



H. Richard Niebuhr (1894-1962)

Niebuhr starts with the relative position of the Church versus Culture of *Christ Against Culture*, writing, "The first answer to the question of Christ and culture we shall consider is the one that uncompromisingly affirms the sole authority of Christ over the Christian and resolutely rejects culture's claims to loyalty."²⁸ This position takes to heart and tries to implement a viable understanding of James' admonition, "*Friendship with the world is enmity toward God.*"²⁹ Taken to its extreme, this is the position of the monastic orders and the cloisters: absolute separation *from* the world is the only manner in which the believing community can keep itself from being defiled *by* the world. More commonly, however,

²⁷ Carson, D. A. *Christ & Culture Revisited* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company; 2008); 29.

²⁸ Niebuhr, H. Richard *Christ & Culture* (New York: HarperOne; 1951); 45.

²⁹ I John 4:4

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modern evangelical adherents to the *Christ Against Culture* perspective advocate living in the world but avoiding all ‘worldly’ pursuits and enjoyments, to lesser or greater degrees. Niebuhr judges this approach as both ‘necessary’ and ‘inadequate,’ and as contributing a valuable legacy to all believers. “In history these Christian withdrawals from and rejections of the institutions of society have been of very great importance to both church and culture. They have maintained the distinction between Christ and Caesar, between revelation and reason, between God’s will and man’s. They have led to reformation in both church and world, though this was never their intention. Hence men and movements of this sort are often celebrated for their heroic roles in the history of a culture which they rejected.”³⁰

From the perspective of Paul’s letters, the *Christ Against Culture* viewpoint would focus on such passages as II Corinthians 6,

Do not be unequally yoked together with unbelievers. For what fellowship has righteousness with lawlessness? And what communion has light with darkness? And what accord has Christ with Belial? Or what part has a believer with an unbeliever? And what agreement has the temple of God with idols? For you are the temple of the living God. (II Corinthians 6:14-16)

The Christ of Culture

This view is at the other extreme of the spectrum from the first one, represented in the early church by Justin Martyr as the *Christ Against Culture* perspective was by Tertullian. Adherents to this view generally “feel no great tension between church and world.”³¹ They see Jesus not only as Israel’s Messiah but also as the Savior of their own culture, “the fulfiller of its hopes and aspirations, the perfecter of its true faith, the source of its holiest spirit.”³² Thus the *Christ of Culture* viewpoint will advocate an intimate relationship between the Church and its surrounding culture, even *symbiosis*. “On the one hand they interpret culture through Christ, regarding those elements in it as most important which are most accordant with his work and person; on the other hand

³⁰ Niebuhr; 66.

³¹ *Ibid.*; 83.

³² *Idem.*

they understand Christ through culture, selecting from his teaching and action as well as from the Christian doctrine about him such points as seem to agree with what is best in civilization.”³³

This view is most frequently found in the modern world in association with a *nationalistic* form of Christianity wherein the life and beliefs of the Christian faith are all but merged, alloy-like, with the ethics and traditions of a particular country and its history. The most common form of this in our day is, of course, the ‘God and Country’ brand of American nationalistic – and most often *Republican* – political Christian activism, and perhaps the most vivid display of this perspective can be seen on too many evangelical church stages, with the American flag standing adjacent to the ‘Christian’ flag. To be sure, the *Christ of Culture* perspective contains within its DNA the *Christ Against Culture*, as those aspects of the prevailing culture that are inimical or at enmity with Christianity are rejected and avoided no less vehemently than by the adherents of the first view. Still, it is remarkable of this second perspective that it approaches the prevailing culture in a generally, often overwhelmingly, positive manner.

Christ Above Culture

Niebuhr considers this perspective to be the majority view throughout the history of the Christian Church, a view that attempts to find a *via media* between the rejectionist *Christ Against* and the more accommodationist *Christ of Culture* views. Carson points out that the third, fourth, and fifth of Niebuhr’s views are really just variations on the same theme, in which the Church is as the center of world cultures and seeks to influence from that position. Carson summarizes, “It may help to think of the last three of his five types as: (3) Christ above culture: synthesis type; (4) Christ above culture: dualist type; (5) Christ above culture: conversionist/transformationist type.”³⁴ The first of these (and the third of Niebuhr’s five) seeks a ‘both/and’ solution to the conundrum of the Church and Culture, attempting to bring the sovereignty of God into reality over

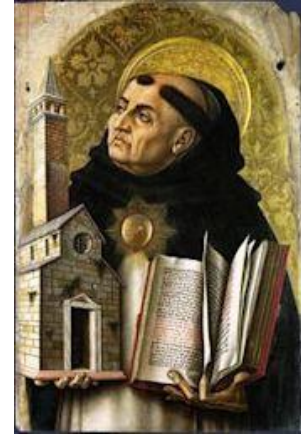
³³ *Idem.*

³⁴ Carson; 20, n20.

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culture through the Church. “We cannot say, ‘Either Christ or culture,’ because we are dealing with God in both cases. We must not say, ‘Both Christ and culture,’ as though there were no great distinction between them; but we must say, ‘Both Christ and culture,’ in full awareness of the dual nature of our law, our end, and our situation.”³⁵

The most (in)famous example of the synthesis view of *Christ Above Culture* is the theological and apologetical writings of the 13th Century Dominican, Thomas Aquinas, who, Niebuhr writes, “represents a Christianity that has achieved or accepted full social responsibility for all the great institutions.”³⁶ Although not developed by Aquinas, the dream of a ‘Holy Roman Empire’ was the institutional embodiment of the synthesis he attempted to create, the ‘two swords’ of the



Thomas Aquinas (1225-74)

Church and the State united in a Christian Empire (though neither ‘sword’ could agree on which held primacy). In its most inoffensive form, this perspective simply admonishes Christians to be model citizens, to, as it were, *pray for the peace of the city to which you are exiled*.³⁷ One might turn to Paul’s exhortation in Romans 13 for a defense of this view.

Let every soul be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and the authorities that exist are appointed by God. Therefore whoever resists the authority resists the ordinance of God, and those who resist will bring judgment on themselves. For rulers are not a terror to good works, but to evil. Do you want to be unafraid of the authority? Do what is good, and you will have praise from the same. For he is God’s minister to you for good. But if you do evil, be afraid; for he does not bear the sword in vain; for he is God’s minister, an avenger to execute wrath on him who practices evil. Therefore you must be subject, not only because of wrath but also for conscience’ sake. For because of this you also pay taxes, for they are God’s ministers attending continually to this very thing. Render therefore to all their due: taxes to whom taxes are due, customs to whom customs, fear to whom fear, honor to whom honor.

(Romans 13:1-7)

³⁵ Niebuhr; 122.

³⁶ *Ibid.*; 128.

³⁷ Jeremiah 29:7

Christ and Culture in Paradox

Niebuhr sees this dualistic viewpoint as a disagreement within advocates of the *Christ Above Culture* perspective, claiming that too much synthesis constituted accommodation and a weakening of the Church and her distinctiveness. “Though the members of this group dissent from the synthesists’ definitions and combinations of Christ and culture they also seek to do justice to the need for holding together as well as for distinguishing between loyalty to Christ and responsibility for culture.”³⁸ The dualism here is not the gnostic dualism of two different kingdoms, of light and darkness, that are on equal footing in the cosmos. Rather it is the recognized dualism of two different worldviews – the *Christian* and the *pagan* – living side by side in the world of this age. The paradox, of course, is that the two worldviews vie for man’s adherence and loyalty, though they are diametrically opposed in destiny. Perhaps the personification of Wisdom and Folly in the Proverbs best encompasses this perspective.

From a practical standpoint, though, *Christ & Culture in Paradox* challenges the Church not to fully abandon culture to its fate, but rather to seek to influence by example of a godly life. This perspective lives in the ever-present and acute tension of God’s reconciling grace in Jesus Christ, on the one hand, and the continuing sinful rebellion of mankind, on the other. “For them the fundamental issue is life is not one which radical Christians face as they draw the line between Christian community and pagan world. Neither is it the issue which cultural Christianity discerns as it sees man everywhere in conflict with nature and locates Christ on the side of the spiritual forces of culture. Yet, like both of these and unlike the synthesist in his more irenic and developing world, the dualist lives in conflict...That conflict is between God and man.”³⁹ Seeking to reach the pagan, unbelieving world without becoming assimilated, this perspective claims such Pauline passages as II Corinthians 5 in defense.

Therefore, from now on, we regard no one according to the flesh. Even though we have known Christ according to the flesh, yet now we know Him thus no longer. Therefore, if anyone is in

³⁸ Niebuhr; 149.

³⁹ *Ibid.*; 150.

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Christ, he is a new creation; old things have passed away; behold, all things have become new. Now all things are of God, who has reconciled us to Himself through Jesus Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation, that is, that God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself, not imputing their trespasses to them, and has committed to us the word of reconciliation. Now then, we are ambassadors for Christ, as though God were pleading through us: we implore you on Christ's behalf, be reconciled to God. (II Corinthians 5:16-20)

Christ the Transformer of Culture

This last of Niebuhr's types is by far the most activist in its attempt to convert not only sinners to Christ, but culture itself as well. If the *Christ Against Culture* represents the isolationist view, *Christ the Transformer of Culture* is definitely the interventionist



Abraham Kuyper (1837-1920)

view. There is a certain, powerful optimism within this perspective, trusting in the eventual 'victory' of Christianity over the pagan culture surrounding it, as Niebuhr writes, "What distinguishes conversionists from dualists is their more positive and hopeful attitude toward culture."⁴⁰ The conversionist, therefore, immerses himself or herself into culture not in an attempt to synthesize it with Christianity, nor by any means in an accommodationist manner, but rather to 'capture' each and every aspect of culture for Jesus Christ. This viewpoint was strongly advocated by the Dutch theologian, academic, and politician Abraham Kuyper, who famously stated, "There is not a square inch in the whole domain of our human existence over which Christ, who is sovereign over all, does not cry: 'Mine!'"

Niebuhr recognizes three theological convictions that motivate the conversionist in his or her attitude and involvement with culture. The first is the fact that Creation is God's, and belongs to God, and He intends to fully reclaim and restore it. Of course, on the basis of such passages as II Corinthians 5 where Paul speaks of the new creation, the conversionist believes that this divine reclamation is taking place in and through the Church. The second conviction mentioned by Niebuhr focuses on the Creation Mandate, whereby Adam was admonished to work at 'tending and keeping' the garden,

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*; 191.

bringing all of Creation under subjection to Man. The Fall undoubtedly corrupted this effort, bringing as it did the divine curse upon human labor. But the Creation Mandate was not abrogated, as it was reiterated by God to Noah after the Flood. Therefore, according to the conversionist perspective, all legitimate human labor is both an act of worship and a means by which the Creation is being reclaimed and restored by God through Christianity.

The third conviction is that of the ongoing history of divine redemption. The conversionist does not believe that this history ended with the Incarnation, Death, and Resurrection of Jesus Christ, but continues on to the consummation of the ages of which Paul speaks in I Corinthians 15. The conversionist is, again, optimistic concerning God's work in this progression of His history, as Niebuhr summarizes, the conversionist holds

...a view of history that holds that to God all things are possible in a history that is fundamentally not a course of merely human events but always a dramatic interaction between God and men. For the exclusive Christian, history is the story of a rising church or Christian culture and a dying pagan civilization; for the cultural Christian, it is the story of the spirit's encounter with nature; for the synthesist, it is a period of preparation under law, reason, gospel, and church for an ultimate communion of the soul with God; for the dualist, history is the time of struggle between faith and unbelief, a period between the giving of the promise of life and its fulfillment. For the conversionist, history is the story of God's mighty deeds and of man's responses to them.⁴¹

Again, from a Pauline perspective, one might quote the Apostle in II Corinthians 10 in support of the conversionist viewpoint, applying Paul's words well beyond the Church to encompass the whole world of culture surrounding her.

For though we walk in the flesh, we do not war according to the flesh. For the weapons of our warfare are not carnal but mighty in God for pulling down strongholds, casting down arguments and every high thing that exalts itself against the knowledge of God, bringing every thought into captivity to the obedience of Christ, and being ready to punish all disobedience when your obedience is fulfilled. (II Corinthians 10:3-6)

⁴¹ *Ibid.*; 194-95.

Summary

Reading each of these perspectives, and considering this or that passage especially in the Pauline corpus, one can generally find something to agree with in each – with the possible exception to the synthesis view. Furthermore, as even Niebuhr admits, none of these ‘types’ of interaction between Church and culture has ever been found in its pure, undiluted form; all are found in every generation of the Church, and often hopelessly intermingled. Still, Niebuhr’s analysis does set before the believer a fairly comprehensive summary of just *how* one can consider the life of the Church in the world and especially the duty/responsibility of the Christian community vis-à-vis the surrounding, ambient culture. What is consistent, though not always obvious, about each of these perspectives is that each is an attempt to have some *impact* on the surrounding culture. Even the isolationist view seeks to evangelize the lost of the surrounding culture, to bring them to the way of escaping the doom to which the unbelieving culture is destined. The fundamental question that never seems to be asked is: What is the *biblical* nature of the relationship between the people of God and the surrounding world? Returning to the imagery of the city set upon a hill, is there an obvious or necessary concern within the city itself for those weary travelers, other than to be both visible and welcoming? Is it the duty of the inhabitants of the city to go out into the highways and byways to bring those travelers within the gates? Granting that there is this duty, is it the *primary* duty? These are the questions that this study seeks to address from the writings of Paul.

What Says Paul?

As noted in the above summary of Niebuhr’s work, each view can usually muster at least some biblical support from the New Testament. However, while each perspective seeks to elucidate the nature of the Church within its surrounding culture, little is said from a biblical point of view about that surrounding culture itself. Yet the Scripture, and indeed Paul, has a lot to say about the unbelieving world in which the Church is set. Not least within this testimony is the example of the people of God under the

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Old Covenant, the nation of Israel. Set in the most heavily traveled corridor in the Ancient Near East, Israel was given admonition after admonition not to mix, mingle, or otherwise associate herself too closely with the surrounding peoples. In this historical reality Paul finds that seemingly isolationist passage quoted above, from II Corinthians 6.

Do not be unequally yoked together with unbelievers. For what fellowship has righteousness with lawlessness? And what communion has light with darkness? And what accord has Christ with Belial? Or what part has a believer with an unbeliever? (II Corinthians 6:14-15)

Thus there is the *a priori* understanding of a vast chasm of meaning and purpose, of very identity, between the inhabitant of the unbelieving world and the believer – there can be no ‘fellowship,’ no *koinonia*, meaning no mutual interrelation or sharing of identity, aspirations, or purpose. If we dig a little deeper, both into this passage and into Paul more generally, we will see why this dichotomous relationship exists: the two realms are under two diametrically-opposed and eternally inimical lords, Christ and Belial. Culture, though Paul does not use that term, is for him something active and offensive, not simply a benign realm of unbelievers waiting to hear the gospel and be saved. It is the realm of the ‘*prince of the power of the air*’ under whose dominion believers once lived, and under whose dominion the rest of the world still lives.

And you He made alive, who were dead in trespasses and sins, in which you once walked according to the course of this world, according to the prince of the power of the air, the spirit who now works in the sons of disobedience, among whom also we all once conducted ourselves in the lusts of our flesh, fulfilling the desires of the flesh and of the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, just as the others. (Ephesians 2:1-3)

Paul saw behind the various human cultures in which he traveled – and make no mistake, Jewish culture was not the same as Roman, and neither were the same as Greek culture, Paul’s world was no more monolithic than our own – and understood that the unbelieving world in which God has raised up the Church was itself a cohesive *system* influenced and governed by ‘*powers and principalities*,’ angelic beings active in the current world age.

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For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this age, against spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenly places. (Ephesians 6:12)

The unifying element in Paul's teachings – which are by no means systematic – concerning the world system is *hostility*, hostility toward God manifested in this age through enmity and violent hatred of God's people. Victor Paul Furnish writes, "There is, then, a fundamental and inalterable opposition between the powers of this age and 'the transcendent power' of God. It is an opposition between 'the spirit of the world' and the 'Spirit of God,' between 'the flesh' and God's Spirit, between sin and righteousness and ultimately between life and death."⁴² These powers, though ultimately impotent to their purpose, desire nothing less than to separate God's people from God forever.



Victor Paul Furnish (b. 1931)

For I am persuaded that neither death nor life, nor angels nor principalities nor powers, nor things present nor things to come, nor height nor depth, nor any other created thing, shall be able to separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord. (Romans 8:38-39)

Significantly, this encouraging passage immediately follows in verse 37, "Yet in all these things we are more than conquerors through Him who loved us." It would seem that Paul viewed earthly powers in the same light as did Jesus when He was confronted with the 'power' of the Roman Empire in the person of Pontius Pilate: "You would have no authority over Me unless it was given to you from above..."⁴³ Understanding that the ultimate power in the universe is God, who has now in Christ Jesus acted to disarm and destroy the God-hating powers and principalities – led in rebellion by the *prince of the power of the air* – the apostle sees ultimate victory somehow tied not only to the work of Christ but also to the continuing work of Christ through the Holy Spirit in the Church.

⁴² Furnish, Victor Paul *Theology and Ethics in Paul* (Nashville: Abingdon Press; 1968); 118.

⁴³ John 19:11

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In a very non-isolationist passage, Paul claims “*And the God of peace will soon crush Satan under your feet.*”⁴⁴

Militant language is common in Paul’s letters with regard to the relationship between the Church and the World, confirming the conclusion that the apostle saw the relationship as one of conflict and not amity. This fact should argue strongly against those perspectives of intercultural exchange between the Church and the World in which the Church stands anything to gain from the transaction. To Paul, this is warfare. However, one of his most important teachings regarding this warfare is that we do not fight it in the same manner as the World fights its battles. Again, from II Corinthians 10,

For though we walk in the flesh, we do not war according to the flesh. For the weapons of our warfare are not carnal but mighty in God for pulling down strongholds, casting down arguments and every high thing that exalts itself against the knowledge of God, bringing every thought into captivity to the obedience of Christ, and being ready to punish all disobedience when your obedience is fulfilled.
(II Corinthians 10:3-6)

This passage seems to indicate a very interventionist attitude toward the surrounding, unbelieving culture. However, the context of the passage is Paul’s own interaction with the Corinthian church, not the city of Corinth in general. Thus it would seem that the apostle’s primary concern was the absence or eradication of any and all worldly influences or behavior *in the church*. This perspective presupposes the Church’s presence in the world, the surrounding culture, from which these negative influences would come. But it also demands an isolation of the believing community from those very same influences. Thus two passages from Paul’s letters to the Corinthians show both sides of this dual perspective. Together, these two passages teach an *isolationist* view of the Church that yet *does not leave the world*.

I wrote to you in my epistle not to keep company with sexually immoral people. Yet I certainly did not mean with the sexually immoral people of this world, or with the covetous, or extortioners, or idolaters, since then you would need to go out of the world. But now I have written to you not to keep company with anyone named a brother, who is sexually immoral, or covetous, or an idolater, or a reviler, or a drunkard, or an extortioner – not even to eat with

⁴⁴ Romans 16:20

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such a person. For what have I to do with judging those also who are outside? Do you not judge those who are inside? But those who are outside God judges. Therefore "put away from yourselves the evil person." (I Corinthians 5:9-13)

Therefore, 'Come out from among them and be separate, says the Lord. Do not touch what is unclean, and I will receive you. I will be a Father to you, and you shall be My sons and daughters, Says the LORD Almighty.' (II Corinthians 6:17-18)

Just as Israel was to live a separated existence in the midst of the surrounding, pagan nations, so also Paul sees the Church living in the midst of the surrounding culture, but nonetheless separated to herself. As God added to the number of believers within the church, the various cultures represented by those believers would inevitably come into contact, and often conflict, within the community. In addition, as is evidenced by the 'meat sacrificed to idols' discussion, the believers in any given city were not encouraged, much less commanded, to isolate themselves from the wider, unbelieving community. Doing their work *as unto the Lord*, obeying the civil magistrates, paying taxes, etc., James Dunn summarizes the apostle's communication to the Roman believers: "Paul evidently entertained no thought of Roman Christians compartmentalizing their lives cut off from the wider community."⁴⁵

The key to unraveling this seemingly tangled mix of isolationist and interventionist in Paul's writings is undoubtedly his interpretation of Christ's finished work, and the outpouring of the Holy Spirit, as the advent of the New Creation, and of Christ's people, the Church, as a New Humanity. "Just as Jesus is the true human, the life of Jesus is being produced in these communities so that the lives of Christians and the corporate life of Christian communities resemble his true humanity."⁴⁶ This concept of a New Humanity living in the midst of the old can be put in terms of an *embedded culture* – a new and regenerated culture made up through its regenerated members, of fragments of all surrounding. In many ways the same; but in the most important ways

⁴⁵ Dunn, James D. G. *The Theology of the Apostle Paul* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company; 1998); 674.

⁴⁶ McKnight; 110.

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wholly different. God has placed this New Humanity, itself a new culture, in the midst of the whole world through the spread of the gospel, in the same manner as He placed Israel in the middle of the Ancient Near East. “But [Paul] sees the church itself as the powerful sign to the watching world, and for that matter to the watching principalities and powers, that a new way of being human has been launched upon the world.”⁴⁷

Such New Humanity communities will inevitably have an impact on the surrounding culture, even if they do not self-consciously seek to do so. Carson writes, “Christian communities honestly seeking to live under the word of God will inevitably generate cultures that, to say the least, will in some sense counter or confront the values of the dominant culture.”⁴⁸ Newbigin adds, “What makes possible the transformation of a whole human community is the presence in it of people whose lives have been regenerated by the work of the Holy Spirit in the heart of the believer through the communication of the gospel.”⁴⁹ This is neither isolationism or interventionism, but rather a new community – a new *culture* – living in the midst of the dominant cultures a new life produced by a new creation in Christ Jesus. This new reality best answers to that comforting metaphor of the City set upon a Hill.

⁴⁷ N. T. Wright in *The Apostle Paul and the Christian Life*; 183.

⁴⁸ Carson, *Christ & Culture Revisited*; 143.

⁴⁹ Newbigin, *Signs*; 88.

Lesson 3 – The World in Which We Live
Text: I Timothy 4:1-16

*“If the genesis of modern individualism lies in the idea of
dignity of the individual,
the genesis of modern humanism lies in the failure to acknowledge
the companion reality of human depravity.”*
(David F. Wells)

The 1970s sit-com, *All in the Family*, a show so completely politically incorrect it could never air today, opened with the theme song, “Those Were the Days.” The theme was appropriate to the show, which focused on the generation gap between Archie & Edith Bunker and their daughter, Gloria and her husband Mike (aka ‘Meathead’). The humor was built around nostalgia, and the rejection of it by the current generation. This is by no means a recommendation to watch the program, if it is even available in syndication, but rather an analogy to just about every passing generation of the Church, with each ‘older’ generation longing wistfully for the past and each ‘current’ generation struggling to make Christianity more relevant to the current culture. But in the Church, the difference is that the longing is rarely for the ‘Church’ of one’s youth. More often it is for some era in the history of Christianity which a current generation views as having gotten things pretty well right. Protestant believers long for a ‘New Testament’ Church, or the church of the Reformation or the 17th Century Puritan era or 18th Century Revivalism. Even Roman Catholics divide into ‘Vatican I’ and ‘Vatican II’ adherents. And the significant exodus of professing Protestants to Catholicism and Eastern Orthodoxy is largely attributed to the ‘traditions’ of those ancient confessions.

These phenomena only serve to prove the aversion all humanity, at least Western humanity, seems to have for the present time. For most societies there existed a ‘Golden Age’ sometime in the past, and all future generations have their nostalgia priests who not only remind others of the ‘good old days,’ but try to move their respective corners of society back to those halcyon days. But this is a deceptive trap and one that can be readily proven by reading the writings of men who actually lived in the time so earnestly longed for. Pick up just about any Puritan Paperback and read how the author

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lamented the apathy and lax profession of the Church in his day. Read the Ante-Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers and hear the same heartfelt cry for vital Christianity and holiness in the churches. Reformed believers especially should know that the solution for the present is never the past, for this attitude is nothing less than a denial of Providence; “Who knows that you have been raised up for just such a time as this,” Mordecai admonished Esther.⁵⁰ The statement, of course, pertained to the threatened destruction of the Jewish people, but the sentiment is timeless: God’s providence forbids His people from every wishing for a different time in which to live, and challenges them to be as the sons of Issachar “*who had understanding of the times and knew what Israel was to do.*”⁵¹

The Word of God is timeless and its truths universal. “*Forever, O Lord, Thy word is settled in heaven.*”⁵² The principles of behavior and the doctrines of belief are not subject to change through the courses of human history. However, the setting in which these truths are to be lived out by the people of God does change, and it is the path of wisdom to both recognize that the age in which we live is the age in which we are to live as believers, rather than to wax nostalgic about some prior age with memories that more than likely false to the actual time. It is important to any discussion of how the Church ought to live in the world to try to gain some understanding of the time in which the Church lives. Each generation, though *crooked and perverse* as the generation before, is nonetheless different, with different cultural dynamics, different moral challenges, and different dynamics between the people of God and the surrounding world. This perspective does not advocate what is known as the ‘acculturation’ of Scripture – the frequent and erroneous attempt to reinterpret the Word to fit the *zeitgeist* of the present age. Rather it is a recognition that the timeless interpretation of biblical truth nonetheless must be applied to different eras in time. Truth is timeless or it is not Truth. But as the sons of Issachar understood their times, so must every generation of believers, of the Church, understand theirs.

⁵⁰ Esther 4:14

⁵¹ I Chronicles 12:32

⁵² Psalm 119:89

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The era in which we live in the early part of the 21st Century is often called ‘post-modernism,’ though the phrase is almost universally recognized as undefinable. What is more agreed upon by historians, philosophers, and sociologists, is that we live in an



David F. Wells (b. 1939)

age that has been defined by the Enlightenment, which itself was a time in which definitions were systematically dismantled. The Enlightenment is also known as the “Age of Reason” due to the fact that human reason was exalted by that philosophical movement to a position supreme over all other forms of knowledge, especially including divine revelation. David Wells, in his *No Place for Truth*, summarizes, “From an intellectual point of view, the modern world began with the

Enlightenment, with that project aimed at accounting for the whole of life strictly from within the bounds of natural reason.”⁵³ This emphasis on human reason was to the exclusion of divine revelation; it was an era in which biblical truth was subjected to human critique, and all that ‘failed’ to reach the mark of human rationality was summarily rejected. This included, of course, such things as the deity of Jesus Christ, the doctrine of the virgin birth and of the resurrection, and ultimately the historicity of such events as Creation, the Flood, and even the reign of David.

This intellectual process of the 17th and 18th Centuries has come to be called ‘modernization’ in that it coincided and provided philosophical support for both the Scientific and the Industrial Revolutions, events that undeniably reshaped the Western world of that time and, ultimately, the entire globe. These movements also coincided, or perhaps even caused, a mass migration of peoples within their own countries and from country to country, an exodus of humanity never before witnessed on the planet. This dispersion itself resulted in the dismantling of traditions and heritage held within local communities for centuries, replacing this social glue with an unraveled social fabric that led to social and subliminal instability. “Whatever else one may say about mod-

⁵³ Wells, David F. *No Place for Truth: Or Whatever Happened to Evangelical Theology?* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company; 1993); 60.

ernization, one of its principal effects has been to break apart the unity of human understanding and disperse the multitude of interests and undertakings away from the center, in relation to which they have gathered their meaning, pushing them to the edges, where they have no easy relation to one another at all. It has done this by breaking down the central core so that there is nothing to which thought and life returns.”⁵⁴ This process has been called ‘atomization,’ the breaking down of a once cohesive social network, usually located for generations within no more than fifty miles of a central geographical point, into smaller and smaller individual units. While it is true that there is *nothing new under the sun*, it may be said that this particular social phenomenon is unique to the past one or two millennia, if not longer. Still, the social disruption is by no means beyond the sphere of biblical insight, for Paul himself recognized a similar dissolution of life within the pagan world in which he lived and moved.

This I say, therefore, and testify in the Lord, that you should no longer walk as the rest of the Gentiles walk, in the futility of their mind, having their understanding darkened, being alienated from the life of God, because of the ignorance that is in them, because of the blindness of their heart; who, being past feeling, have given themselves over to lewdness, to work all uncleanness with greediness. (Ephesians 4:17-19)

Brethren, join in following my example, and note those who so walk, as you have us for a pattern. For many walk, of whom I have told you often, and now tell you even weeping, that they are the enemies of the cross of Christ: whose end is destruction, whose god is their belly, and whose glory is in their shame – who set their mind on earthly things. (Philippians 3:17-19)

Where is the wise? Where is the scribe? Where is the disputer of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of this world? For since, in the wisdom of God, the world through wisdom did not know God, it pleased God through the foolishness of the message preached to save those who believe. For Jews request a sign, and Greeks seek after wisdom; but we preach Christ crucified, to the Jews a stumbling block and to the Greeks foolishness, but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. Because the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men. (I Corinthians 1:20-25)

⁵⁴ Wells; 7.

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Paul ministered in a pagan world; our world today is often referred to as ‘neo-pagan.’ But the difference between our world and the apostle’s is noteworthy. Wherever Paul went he could assume the prevailing worldview to be *theistic* – usually polytheistic, with often a mixture of pantheism thrown in, but never atheistic. This ancient reality is captured vividly in Luke’s history of Paul’s time in Athens.

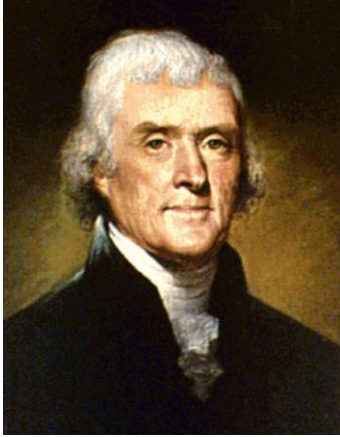
Now while Paul waited for them at Athens, his spirit was provoked within him when he saw that the city was given over to idols. Therefore he reasoned in the synagogue with the Jews and with the Gentile worshipers, and in the marketplace daily with those who happened to be there. Then certain Epicurean and Stoic philosophers encountered him. And some said, “What does this babbling man want to say?”...Then Paul stood in the midst of the Areopagus and said, “Men of Athens, I perceive that in all things you are very religious...” (Acts 17:16-18, 22)

It is simply a necessary realization of our times to acknowledge that the world around us no longer resembles Athens, or really any other city or village of the ancient world. The massive technological advancements of the modern era are nothing by way of an obstacle to evangelism when compared to the pervasive spirit of atheism, both expressed and practiced, that undeniably characterizes our age. On the surface and according to pollsters like Gallup, ‘belief’ in God, heaven, hell, and the devil is still well above 50% in the United States, but the raw numbers fall every time the poll is taken, and the numbers themselves fail to account for the ‘existential’ atheism that seems to guide the public conscience in our day. Gallup reported another drop in these categorical beliefs just recently, following a twenty-year trend of decline. “Since the pollster first began collecting survey data on the subject more than two decades ago, belief in God and heaven has dropped 16 points, while belief in hell has fallen 12 points and belief in the devil and angels has decreased by 10 points.”⁵⁵ People may say they believe in a god, or in the devil, or in eternal destiny, but their life- and political choices speak otherwise. The gods, so prevalent in Athens as to vex Paul’s spirit, have been all but banished from the modern West.

⁵⁵ [Belief in God, the devil falls to new low: Gallup \(yahoo.com\)](#). Accessed 21 July 2023.

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The unbelieving culture in the United States chants the mantra of ‘Separation between Church and State’ as a bastion against the presence of religious faith in the public forum, especially *Christian* religious faith, as other faiths seem to be protected under the aegis of a ‘minority’ religion. Though it is evident that the First Amendment to the U. S. Constitution was intended only to protect the free exercise of religion from infringement, encroachment, or establishment of competing religions by the Federal Gov-



Thomas Jefferson (1743-1826)

ernment, the average American today not only believes the famous phrase to be in the Constitution itself (it is not) but that it legally forbids an active Christian voice in the public square, even if that ‘voice’ is nothing more than a creche at Christmas. By way of establishing the cultural milieu in which the modern Church must now live, it might be helpful to review the pertinent documents. First of all, the separation clause is found, not in

the Constitution, but in a letter written by newly-elected President Thomas Jefferson in response to a supportive letter from the Danbury Baptist Association in Danbury, Connecticut. Jefferson is certainly not known as the most religious of the Founding Fathers, being at best a Deist and undoubtedly an unbeliever in terms of the core tenets of biblical Christianity. No doubt ‘separation’ meant something different to Jefferson than it did to the framers of the First Amendment.

Believing with you that religion is a matter which lies solely between Man & his God, that he owes account to none other for his faith or his worship, that the legitimate powers of government reach actions only, & not opinions, I contemplate with sovereign reverence that act of the whole American people which declared that their legislature should "make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof," thus building a wall of separation between Church & State. Adhering to this expression of the supreme will of the nation in behalf of the rights of conscience, I shall see with sincere satisfaction the progress of those sentiments which tend to restore

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to man all his natural rights, convinced he has no natural right in opposition to his social duties.⁵⁶

But even Jefferson's use of the separation clause can and probably should be interpreted in accordance with the danger at the time – a danger many had already experienced, or their ancestors had experienced, under the Church of England – of one's religion being either dictated, hindered, or in some other way curtailed by a State Church. In addition, even in the colonies (such as Virginia, Jefferson's home 'country'), taxes were levied for the maintenance of the state church, even on citizens who did not worship within the Anglican communion. The 'wall of separation' was not intended, even by Jefferson, to protect the State from the Church, but rather the other way round. This point is sadly moot today, as there is little respect, and even less regard, for the facts of history in the development of modern public opinion and legislation.

American citizens are guaranteed the freedom to be atheists no less than to adhere to any actual religion. That cannot be denied without infringing upon constitutionally-guaranteed liberties, and that is certainly a slippery slope that historically leads to the removal of liberties formerly considered inviolate. But the political issue is not in view at this point in our study, though it will be later on. The point of all of this is to again illustrate the progressive march of atheism as a competing *zeitgeist* in Western culture, a 'spirit of the age' that, at least in large sections of Western culture and population, has already won the battle against theism. And the second point of this discussion is just that: it is a battle. Modern atheism is not merely a calm, philosophically-considered worldview arrived at by people merely exercising their 'God-given' right to not believe in a god. It is an aggressive, even satanic, attack against any and all forms of that theism that for millennia served as the social glue of humanity.

Atheism has always been satanic, and Paul experienced the aggressive nature of unbelief in his day, though rarely if ever in the guise of blatant atheism. Rather it was the case that both Jewish and pagan 'atheism' was of a practical nature – a professed be-

⁵⁶ Thomas Jefferson's Letter to the Danbury Association of Baptists; [Jefferson's Letter to the Danbury Baptists \(June 1998\) - Library of Congress Information Bulletin \(loc.gov\)](#). Accessed 21 July 2023.

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lief in God or the gods coupled with a life that essentially denied that profession. Paul warned Titus that this is exactly what the latter was to expect on the island of Crete. In an assessment of humanity that would hardly be spoken by a modern, Western evangelical, Paul writes,

For there are many insubordinate, both idle talkers and deceivers, especially those of the circumcision, whose mouths must be stopped, who subvert whole households, teaching things which they ought not, for the sake of dishonest gain. One of them, a prophet of their own, said, "Creteans are always liars, evil beasts, lazy gluttons." This testimony is true. Therefore rebuke them sharply, that they may be sound in the faith, not giving heed to Jewish fables and commandments of men who turn from the truth. To the pure all things are pure, but to those who are defiled and unbelieving nothing is pure; but even their mind and conscience are defiled. They profess to know God, but in works they deny Him, being abominable, disobedient, and disqualified for every good work. (Titus 1:10-16)

What happened to make modern, Western society so uncommonly atheistic in comparison to all past ages? What intellectual and/or philosophical force separated the religious impulse of man from his political thought and life? It is significant that Thomas Jefferson, referred to above, was himself very much a child of the Enlightenment and not of the Reformation. The 18th Century represented a massive paradigm shift in Western thought, and not just in philosophy. The advent of the Scientific Revolution, which we might trace to the 17th Century, gave rise to the Industrial Revolution, which created a migration of people from rural to urban habitation on a scale unprecedented in human history, at least in times other than those of war and pestilence. The coupling of the Industrial Revolution with the liberal philosophy of the Enlightenment is often referred to as 'modernity' – the era of recent human history to which the current age is 'post.' Modernity, or the 'Modern Era,' consists in the Western world – Western Europe, Canada, and the United States along with associated colonial possessions and heirs – of a remarkable advance in such demographic makers as literacy, life expectancy, population growth, infant mortality (falling), etc., to the extent that Western society began to view the past, particularly its own past, as irrelevant to the present and future. Enlightenment writers perversely used the language of 'new creation' to refer to the liberalism

of their day. Jürgen Moltmann writes, “The society which is dominated by the modernity and progressiveness of this civilization has the peculiar characteristic of considering itself to be neutral towards matters of religion and questions of value and consequently emancipating itself from the control of history and tradition, whereby it also withdraws itself from the influence of religions and religious bodies.”⁵⁷

One of the results of modernity, and the consequent mass migration of the Western world, is a phenomenon known as ‘plurality.’ Plurality refers to the heterogeneity of a society in which many different ethnic and religious groups coexist within a common city. The concept was by no means unfamiliar to Paul, though the word may have been. The Roman Empire of the first century was one massive plurality, even in Judea, and frequently Greeks and Romans and Jews and ‘barbarians’ from all parts of the world inhabited the same cities. The difference between Paul’s time and modernity is that the binding glue of religion – albeit a pagan religion in most cases – has progressively dried, cracked, and fallen from the seams of modern society. Moltmann blames this on the Industrial Revolution primarily. “It was the rise of industrial society that first destroyed the old harmony between *ecclesia* and *societas*.”⁵⁸ The rise of industrial production has brought many of life’s conveniences within the reach of more and more people, and the accompanying technological advances have made life far more efficient, safe, and enjoyable than any previous generation could have imagined. But at a cost. Wells writes, “Culture is laden with values, many of which work to rearrange the substance of faith, even when they are mediated to us through the benefits that the modern world also bestows upon us. Technology is a case in point. While it has greatly enhanced many of our capabilities and spread its largess across the entirety of our life, it also brings with it an almost inevitable naturalism and an ethic that equates what is efficient with what is good.”⁵⁹

The impact of this division of religion and society, the negation of religion as a participant in the public forum, is the loss of ‘center.’ This phenomenon would be true,

⁵⁷ Moltmann; 305.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*; 306.

⁵⁹ Wells; 11.

and is true, wherever and involving whatever religion formerly intrinsic to any society, but for the purposes of this study, that religion in Western Civilization has, for the past fifteen hundred years, been some variation of Christianity. When Christianity has been banished from public to private life, the 'truth' that generally held Western society together – broadly speaking, of course, and not discounting constant internal disagreement and debate – becomes utterly fluid, individualistic, and impotent. "We thus lose our bearings, for we lose that truth, that divine order to which in mind and spirit we could always return, the divine order by which we understood our world, the order for which we looked in life's dark moments to reestablish our bearings. This has all broken apart...And, as the center has collapsed, our psyches have become more and more strained, even fractured."⁶⁰

Though the phenomenon of modernity is unique to the world after the 18th Century, the manifestation of futility and hopelessness, loneliness and existential grasping, were by no means unknown to the ancient world. Paul, of course, summarizes the course of all mankind away from God in Romans 1, a passage that is remarkably descriptive of our own time.

For since the creation of the world His invisible attributes are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made, even His eternal power and Godhead, so that they are without excuse, because, although they knew God, they did not glorify Him as God, nor were thankful, but became futile in their thoughts, and their foolish hearts were darkened. Professing to be wise, they became fools, and changed the glory of the incorruptible God into an image made like corruptible man – and birds and four-footed animals and creeping things. Therefore God also gave them up to uncleanness, in the lusts of their hearts, to dishonor their bodies among themselves, who exchanged the truth of God for the lie, and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever. Amen. For this reason God gave them up to vile passions. For even their women exchanged the natural use for what is against nature. Likewise also the men, leaving the natural use of the woman, burned in their lust for one another, men with men committing what is shameful, and receiving in themselves the penalty of their error which was due. And even as they did not like to retain God in their knowledge, God gave them over to a debased mind, to do those things which are not fitting; being filled with all unrighteousness, sexual immorality, wickedness, covetousness, maliciousness; full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, evil-mindedness; they are whisperers, backbiters, haters of God, violent, proud, boasters, in-

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*; 8.

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ventors of evil things, disobedient to parents, undiscerning, untrustworthy, unloving, unforgiving, unmerciful; who, knowing the righteous judgment of God, that those who practice such things are deserving of death, not only do the same but also approve of those who practice them. (Romans 1:20-32)

So, while we are outlining how our age differs from Paul's, we are necessarily reminded of the similarities, for man has never been terribly original in his sins. As the French saying goes, *plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose*.⁶¹ The latter part of the passage also reminds us that the society of Paul's day not only did not condemn these acts of wickedness, it encouraged them, another characteristic of the ancient world that is similar to our own. This should make us realize that Paul's teachings and admonitions, like all of Scripture, are as applicable today as they were in his own day. Thus the point of this particular exercise in '*understanding their time*' is by no means intended to imply that the biblical truth must somehow be modified for the modern world. Rather it is to highlight those characteristics of the modern world that present the greatest challenge to living the biblical truth in *this* crooked and perverse generation.

What is most remarkable about the current era is the seemingly self-conscious attempt of modern Western society to banish God from the public forum, either through outright atheism or the 'privatization' of religion. Personal faith in Jesus Christ is not yet wholly condemned in the West, but it is strongly pressured to remain personal and private. This is perhaps the most stunning development in Western Christianity over the past two hundred years: the general acceptance of Christian institutions of the verdict that the 'separation of Church and State' effectively isolates the faith behind the church doors. To be sure, there is nonetheless a great deal of political activism in the name of Christianity, but the case will be made later in this study that this activism bears little resemblance to biblical Christianity. No, the course of the last few generations has proven Jürgen Moltmann correct in his assessment from the mid 1960s, "[The Christian Church] became something which in its religious form is never was and

⁶¹ 'The more things change, the more they stay the same,' attributed to the French critic Jean-Baptiste Alphonse Karr (1808-90).

which, moreover, from the theological standpoint of the New Testament it can never seek to be – namely, a *cultus privatus*.”⁶²

This conclusion regarding the privatization of Christianity may seem at odds with the undeniable emphasis of Western evangelicalism on political activism, a topic that will be discussed in far more detail in its own place. But the contention here is that the political activism of modern evangelicals, especially *American* evangelicals, is first of all not a function of the Church *per se*, and second, is more a manifestation of ‘Christian nationalism’ than it is Christianity. Again, these contentions will be unpacked in a separate chapter devoted to the political involvement of believers in any *crooked and perverse generation*, whether Paul’s or ours. For the moment, and in preliminary defense of the above assertions, let us consider the impact of ‘Christian’ activism over the past generation, say, from the 1980s to the present. Hunter is undeniably correct when he summarizes this period of at least American history thus, “...the reality is that politics is the tactic of choice for many Christians as they think of changing the world...It is not an exaggeration to say that *the dominant public witness of the Christian churches in America since the early 1980s has been a political witness*.”⁶³ Has this ‘witness’ been effective? In the early 80s there was no discussion of same-sex marriage (though homosexuality was undoubtedly a public issue), no mention of ‘gender fluidity,’ no concept of ‘wokeness.’ Has the country become more moral in the intervening decades of increasingly vitriolic political activism from the Christian ‘Right’? Has the political program begun by Jerry Falwell’s Moral Majority indeed changed the culture of the United States into a more ‘Christian’ one?

Hunter points out that throughout its history, the United States has been a remarkable ‘religious’ and even ‘Christian’ society. Christian churches and denominations have consistently dominated the public religious forum, and continue to do so over all other religions. According to Pew Research study, the Jewish population – both observant and non-observant – constituted only 2.8% of the U. S. population in the 2020

⁶² Moltmann; 310.

⁶³ Hunter; 12. Italics original.

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Census⁶⁴; Muslims accounted for a mere 1.1%.⁶⁵ According to the same survey, 70% of Americans still identify as ‘Christian.’ This is by no means to conclude that our current society is, in any meaningful sense of the word, ‘Christian,’ but it does indicate the continuing domination of the Christian religion in American religious thought and practice; it really is not threatened by any other faith. Yet in spite of this predominance – lower than ever before in our history while still remarkably high – “our culture – business culture, law, government, the academic world, popular entertainment – is intensely materialistic and secular.”⁶⁶ A former leader in the conservative Christian activist movement, public commentator Cal Thomas, essentially abandoned the effort after decades of dauntless effort, realizing that the movement has



Cal Thomas (b. 1942)

consistently failed in its stated objectives. In October, 2022, Thomas wrote,

The subject of Christian Nationalism is again appearing in our political life, inhabiting a portion of the Republican Party. It is nothing new, having taken many forms in the past, including Moral Rearmament, Prohibition, Christian Reconstructionism, Moral Majority, and the Christian Coalition. In each incarnation, people have been told that something approaching Heaven on Earth can be accomplished through the political system and through a government led by folks who believe as they do. Each time it has failed.⁶⁷

The typical ‘evangelical’ response to such nay-saying is to claim that the objector has all but abandoned the faith by abandoning the country to the works of evil. Such a response has been consistently directed at Thomas since his retreat from the Moral Majority and Christian Coalition. One such objector waxes hot in his disdain for Thomas’ rejection of Christian political activism, concluding that all exhortations to rebuke, reprove, admonition that are read in the New Testament must obviously refer to the Church’s role in the public forum and not to within the congregations themselves.

⁶⁴[The size of the U.S. Jewish population | Pew Research Center](#). Accessed 24July2023.

⁶⁵[Islam in the United States - Wikipedia](#). Accessed 24July2023.

⁶⁶Hunter; 19.

⁶⁷[Cal Thomas: Faith and politics | WORLD \(wng.org\)](#). Accessed 24July2023.

Thomas-type thinking has spawned a disobedient church which has become so culturally irrelevant that one writer said, "The Church surrenders the world to the enemy and retreats into defeat as though it were victory." Instead of studying his Bible, Thomas appears to be heeding the many clergymen who preach as if man is only a soul to be saved and treat the Bible as solely a roadmap to Heaven. They incessantly stress that one is saved not by works, but by redeeming grace (which I believe), while neglecting to preach that Christians are to show their faith by and glorify God through good works (Mt. 5:16; 2 Tim. 3:16, 17; Jas. 2:18). Do they fear the brethren might somehow work too hard for the Lord? Such preachers are too spineless to "reprove, rebuke, and exhort" (2 Tim. 4:2), to preach against sin and about the great moral issues of the day, but instead provide a weekly serving of pap and warm fuzzies calculated to make the brethren feel good about themselves. They lack the courage and/or knowledge to tell why abortion, homosexuality, pornography, feminism, big government, etc. are Biblically wrong. It was, in fact, just such neglectful and unfaithful preaching that first created the need for the Christian Coalition.⁶⁸

The consistent response of the 'Christian' political activist is that we must just try harder, believe more thoroughly, pray more fervently, and (above all) *vote*, in order to finally see the 'victory.' This methodological debate lies at the heart of modern evangelicalism's search for its role in the modern world, and as such will be discussed in much greater detail in a subsequent chapter (or two). The point here is that at least a few reputable voices are meekly crying out that the continued attempts of Western evangelical Christianity to 'change the world' through greater political action are exercises in futility and essentially constitute the famous definition of insanity: doing the same thing over and over again expecting a different result. This is not to say that the Church has no role or voice in the public forum, nor that it serves no purpose in terms of 'culture change.' It is merely to suggest, to strongly suggest, that the methods employed - in the United States in particular and for the entirety of her history - are insufficient to attain the goal, and may even have proven counterproductive. After summarizing the conventional wisdom that has been employed by American evangelicals for generations,

⁶⁸ [Cal Thomas, Religion, and Politics \(chalcedon.edu\)](http://calthomas.chalcedon.edu). Accessed 24July2023.

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Hunter simply concludes: “This account is almost wholly mistaken.”⁶⁹ It may be past time to rethink the methodology of culture change as well as the very concept itself.

⁶⁹ Hunter; 17.

Lesson 4 – Worldviews in Conflict
Text: I Corinthians 7:20-40

“It is obvious that the story of the empty tomb cannot be fitted into our contemporary worldview, or indeed into any worldview except one of which it is the starting point.”
(Leslie Newbigin)

18th Century German philosopher Immanuel Kant is perhaps the most influential person no one knows. Kant, to be sure, is well known among philosophers and theologians, but is hardly a household name, perhaps even in today’s Germany. It is, however, not too much to say that Kant was the unwitting father of ‘post-modernism,’ and of the pervasive ‘reality-is-what-you-think-it-is’ mentality that permeates Western culture today. Kant was not himself religious,



Immanuel Kant (1724-1804)

but did not appear in his writings to be an open advocate of atheism. Agnosticism, rather, was more descriptive of his philosophy, believing and teaching that man cannot know the nature of things as they are in themselves, but only by the impression they make upon our individual senses. In many respects, Kant was the epitome of the Enlightenment, and his *Critique of Pure Reason* has long been hailed as the definitive argument against absolute truth and knowledge. As a result, Kant became known by his detractors as *der Alleszermalmende Kant* – ‘the all-destroying Kant.’⁷⁰

Kant will make his cameo appearances throughout this study due to the impact of his philosophy on the culture of the modern West. But here it is his use, apparently the first use, of the word **weltanschauung**, meaning ‘world perspective.’ The German term has become popular in modern philosophical writings dealing with culture and epistemology, and is frequently used (in the German) in Christian treatises on the subjects. The English equivalent is the compound ‘worldview,’ reflecting the epistemologi-

⁷⁰ The phrase was first coined by Moses Mendelssohn (1729-86). [The All-Destroying Kant | Philosophy Archive \(wordpress.com\)](https://www.philosophyarchive.com/2013/07/30/the-all-destroying-kant/). Accessed 30July2023.

cal content with which Kant invested the German word. Ronald Nash, in his *Worldviews in Conflict*, defines the term thus: “A worldview, then, is a conceptual scheme by which



Ronald H. Nash (1936-2006)

we consciously or unconsciously place or fit everything we believe and by which we interpret and judge reality.”⁷¹ Nash’s use of the adverbs ‘consciously’ and ‘unconsciously’ is important to the whole study of ‘worldviews,’ since the majority of mankind operates within a particular worldview unconsciously, often never realizing either the framework of their own thought or the reason why others fail to think the

same way. Nash begins his book with this observation, having asserted that every rational human being possesses a worldview, “It seems sometimes that few have any idea what that worldview is or even that they have one. Yet achieving awareness of our worldview is one of the most important things we can do to enhance self-understanding, and insight into the worldviews of others is essential to an understanding of what makes them tick.”⁷²

The primary use of this concept within modern Christian apologetics is to highlight the discord and conflict between a ‘Christian’ worldview and any other worldview encountered in this world. This is certainly implied in the title of Nash’s book, as it is in the more famous one by Charles Colson, *Kingdoms in Conflict*. Hunter quotes Colson’s definition of a worldview: “the sum total of our beliefs about the world, the ‘big picture’ that directs our daily decisions and actions...[it] is a way of seeing and comprehending *all* reality.”⁷³ Colson’s contention, along with most modern



Charles Colson (1931-2012)

Christian apologists, is that the Christian worldview will triumph over the pagan worldview only if Christians individually conform their decisions and actions to the worldview they profess to believe. “Our choices are shaped by what we believe is real

⁷¹ Nash, Ronald H. *Worldviews in Conflict* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House; 1992); 16.

⁷² *Idem.*

⁷³ Hunter; 6.

and true, right and wrong, good and beautiful. Our choices are shaped by our worldview...If we are going to succeed in restoring a moral influence in American culture, we need to cultivate a Christian mind and live out a biblical worldview.”⁷⁴ This view is certainly in keeping with the stereotypical American optimism, very triumphalist in its overall tenor. But the issue of whether Colson’s perspective is correct is a matter of debate (and Hunter definitely believes that it is not) and is the essential point of contention in this study. Thus we will be returning to the ‘Christ the Transformer of Culture’ view often since it does represent a majority report within modern American evangelicalism – if only Christians will adopt and practice a Christian worldview.

The issue in this particular chapter, however, is another conflict between worldviews. Historically, it can confidently be said that every generation of the Church has found itself in ‘conflict’ with the surrounding culture in some measure or another. Even the papal attempts to exercise control over secular rulers during the Middle Ages resulted inevitably in conflict. Worldviews in conflict, as an apologetical concept, uniformly relates to the antagonism between *contemporary* worldviews: those of the believing community and of the surrounding, unbelieving world. Never mind the fact that worldviews are never so monolithic as is assumed by authors like Nash and Colson, a more important question should be posed first: *How does the contemporary worldview compare and relate to the biblical worldview, expressed especially in the letters of the Apostle Paul?* It is of little benefit to either the Church or the world, if their two divergent worldviews are in conflict and the Church’s worldview is in conflict itself with Paul’s.

To start, however, we need to be clear on terms. What we are not seeking to determine is a thorough description of the *culture* – or, better, *cultures* – in which Paul lived and ministered. While a historical context, inasmuch as it can be determined, is valuable to the interpretation of Paul’s teachings and admonitions, we must acknowledge that the cultural setting of, say, 1st Century Corinth is vastly different from 21st Century New York. Worldview, by definition, transcends culture and is the source of culture. Differing emphases within a worldview and different interpretations and

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*; 7.

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manifestations of a worldview, will produce different cultures as well as nuances within individual cultures. Culture is not the same thing as worldview, and multiculturalism is not the same thing as pluralism, the presence of multiple worldviews within the same society. If culture is resistant to change, worldviews are almost immutable. This must be especially so if the worldview purports to represent Truth with the capital T, the *truth as it is in Jesus Christ*.

Paul lived in a world that was both multi-cultural and pluralist, and so does the modern Western Church. To talk about worldview, then, is to move from the traditions and mores that bind certain segments of human society together (culture) to the metaphysical and often subconscious epistemological framework that informs the broader scope of humanity (worldview). The former category, culture, changes inexorably and due to forces beyond the influence of any individual or group within that culture. Indeed, culture change is almost always recognized in hindsight. The realm of worldview, however, is far more durable though often less conscious to its adherents. Therefore we find *platonian* worldviews and *epicurean* worldviews and, of course, what we call a 'Christian' worldview. These are systems of thought, frameworks of perception by which large segments of human society tend to organize their sensory input in similar ways. Thus the 'Western' mind as contrasted with the 'Eastern' mind. When multiple cultures exist within one regional society there will be tension; when multiple worldviews attempt to co-exist there can be, and often is, violent conflict.

It is the contention of the Apostle Paul that there are really only two worldviews – acknowledging that he did not use the term – within human society: *truth* and *lie*. Other couplets that are somewhat synonymous in Paul's letters would be *life* and *death*, *light* and *darkness*. The simplicity of the Pauline worldview is that each is governed by a diametrical opposed principle, each is under the sovereignty of either the Lord Jesus Christ or the '*prince of the power of the air*.' An infinite number of cultures can exist within the satanic worldview, and the Christian worldview can exist within an infinite variety of cultures. But there is either truth or falsehood, light and life or darkness and death. This analysis explains why every generation of the Church finds itself in conflict

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with the surrounding culture, informed as it is by the worldview of darkness. It also explains why accommodation of culture by the Church leads inevitably to the dilution of the Church's message and eventually the death of the Church within that context. Paul understood that *"the form of this world is passing away"* and therefore the Church cannot attach itself to that form without also passing away with it. Though post-modern man does not like to hear such dualistic choices as 'right & wrong,' Paul knew of no shades of gray.

The quote noted above is from an interesting and appropriate passage in Paul's first letter to the Corinthian Church, a passage that encompasses our study of the Church in the world. It is, however, another one of Paul's many sayings *"difficult to understand."*

But this I say, brethren, the time is short, so that from now on even those who have wives should be as though they had none, those who weep as though they did not weep, those who rejoice as though they did not rejoice, those who buy as though they did not possess, and those who use this world as not misusing it. For the form of this world is passing away. (I Corinthians 7:29-31)

The context of this troublesome passage makes it clear that Paul is talking about the believer's life in this world, in the 'in between age' that every generation of the Church finds itself. The immediate 'occasion' of Paul's comments appears to be marriage – marriage of a believer to an unbeliever, whether a single man or a virgin should even get married, or a widow remarried. Yet as is almost always the case with the apostle, while addressing a particular issue he establishes a more universal principle. For instance, in verses 20-24 Paul admonishes believers to *"remain with God in that condition in which he was called."*

Let each one remain in the same calling in which he was called. Were you called while a slave? Do not be concerned about it; but if you can be made free, rather use it. For he who is called in the Lord while a slave is the Lord's freedman. Likewise he who is called while free is Christ's slave. You were bought at a price; do not become slaves of men. Brethren, let each one remain with God in that state in which he was called. (I Corinthians 7:20-24)

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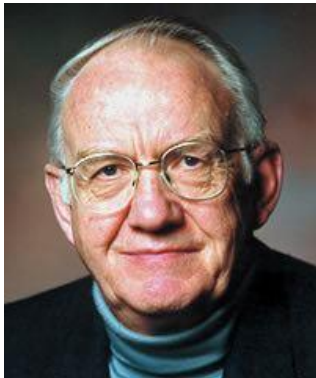
The passage, then, pertains to how believers are to live in this world. The exegetical problems arise along several lines. First, Paul makes a distinction between the Lord's command (v. 10) and his own admonition (v. 12), concluding the overall section by saying, *"and I think that I also have the Spirit of God."* Without the distinctions, *"not I but the Lord"* and *"is say, not the Lord,"* we would naturally take each verse as dominical, but Paul makes it clear that in some of what he is saying he is not commanding,

Now concerning virgins I have no command of the Lord, but I give an opinion as one who by the mercy of the Lord is trustworthy. (7:25)

And this I say for your own benefit; not to put a restraint upon you, but to promote what is seemly... (7:35)

But in my opinion she is happier if she remains as she is; and I think that I also have the Spirit of God. (7:40)

The whole of Paul's advice, when not derived from a command of the Lord, seems to flow from his concern regarding the 'shortened' time. *"But this I say, brethren, the time has been shortened..."* What does he mean by this? The traditional interpretation



Gordon Fee (1934-2022)

at least in the modern era, is that Paul expected the *Parousia*, the return or appearance of the Lord, imminently. The theory goes that the disciples were convinced by such passages as Matthew 16:28 that Jesus' return would be within the generation then living.⁷⁵ While it is possible that the disciples anticipated the imminent return of the Lord – *"It is not for you to know times or seasons which the Father has put*

in His own authority." – the fact remains that Paul does not mention the *Parousia* either in the context of I Corinthians 7 or, indeed, in the entire epistle, with the notable exception of I Corinthians 15:23 where the sense of an immanent return is definitely not present. Throughout the epistle Paul rebukes, admonishes, encourages; all without reference to

⁷⁵ *"Assuredly, I say to you, there are some standing here who shall not taste death till they see the Son of Man coming in His kingdom."*

an immanent return of the Lord. Gordon Fee comments, “The proper understanding probably lies elsewhere, although precision is difficult to come by...In vv. 29-31 Paul does not mention the Parousia, nor suffering, nor living as though the End were tomorrow...Rather, in view of the ‘time’ and the fact that the ‘form’ of this present world is passing away, he calls for a radically new understanding of their *relationship to the world*.”⁷⁶

This interpretation is confirmed by what Paul says above about the slave and the freedman: not only are they to remain in the state in which they were called (though the slave should attain his freedom if possible), they should understand that the basis for maintaining the *status quo* is found in the work of the Lord, “*You were bought with a price; do not become slaves of men.*”⁷⁷ The believer’s status is now determined by what the Lord has done; this is the governing principle in what the apostle writes. This is not to say that there is no element of ‘imminence’ in such phrases as “*the present distress*” and “*the time has been shortened.*” But it is not a mistaken sense that the Lord was coming back on the apostle’s schedule, or that somehow Paul knew God’s schedule for the *Parousia*; rather it was the realization that Jesus Christ, having finished completely the work for which the Father sent Him, could very well return at any time. “This does not so much mean that the final consummation is imminent (although in a sense that is always true for God’s people) as that the future, which was set in motion by the event of Christ and the Spirit, has been ‘shortened’ so that it is now in plain view.”⁷⁸ This sense of immanence should be felt by every generation of believers, and the only reason it is not is not because we know better, but because we no longer care.⁷⁹

Paul’s concern, therefore, is not with the *amount* of time they have left, but with the radical new perspective the ‘foreshortened future’ gives one with regard to the *present* age.

⁷⁶ Fee, Gordon *The First Epistle to the Corinthians* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company; 1987); 336.

⁷⁷ I Corinthians 7:23

⁷⁸ Fee; 339.

⁷⁹ *Cp.* II Peter 3:3-11

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Those who have a definite future and see it with clarity live in the present with radically altered values as to what counts and what does not.⁸⁰

Fee's interpretation of the passage in I Corinthians 7 is in accord with the overall teaching of Paul regarding the *inaugurated eschatology* of the future age. Paul consistently teaches in his epistles that "the future already begun with Christ and the Spirit" and this fact "determines one's entire existence in the present."⁸¹ If Paul had indeed expected the return of the Lord in a definitive, immanent way, it stands to reason that his recommendation regarding marriage would have been unequivocal. Thus "*the present distress*" should not be viewed as a current persecution (of which nothing is mentioned concerning the Corinthians) or a cataclysmic prelude to the return of the Lord. In light of what he says concerning other relationships (i.e., the slave and the freedman already mentioned), it is probably better to interpret this phrase as referring to the general situation of all believers, as believers, in an age the form of which is *passing away*. "That is, the 'present distress' belongs to the eschatological framework of their present existence, from which they are to understand the advice to stay as one is (unmarried)."⁸²

This interpretation better suits the 'as ifs' in verses 29-31, which cover the whole gamut of human life: *marriage, sorrow, joy, buying and owning*, and, summarily, *using the world*. What Paul says in these verses has been misinterpreted and misapplied to the great detriment of believing communities who have done away with marriage (replacing it, usually, with polygamy), with property rights, and/or with any and all expressions of emotion. This is to interpret Paul as if he were a Stoic philosopher rather than a Christian apostle. Paul cannot be advocating, for instance, apathy toward one's wife, when elsewhere he admonishes husbands to "*love their wives just as Christ loves the Church*."⁸³ Furthermore, if the whole body is to mourn with those who mourn, and rejoice with those who rejoice (I Corinthians 12), how can Paul negate those emotions here? These 'as if' couplets are meant rather to stand under the overall rubric of a life

⁸⁰ Fee; 339.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*; 337.

⁸² *Idem.*

⁸³ Ephesians 5:25

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lived with reference to the present reality of the future in Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit. “But they are not to be taken literally; they are rhetoric, pure and simple.”⁸⁴

But Paul is advocating neither the Stoic’s ‘aloofness’ from the world nor the apocalyptic’s ‘escape’ from the world. What he is calling for is a radical new stance toward the world, predicated on the saving event of Christ that has marked off our existence in a totally new way. Just as in Christ the slave is a freedman and the free man a slave, because one’s existence is determined by God, so now one does not so much live ‘detached’ from the world (after all, Paul expects the Corinthians to continue doing all five of these things) as totally free from its control.⁸⁵

One reasonable conclusion to be drawn from Paul’s statement is that believers are to have a ‘loose hold’ on the things of this world, including even those things that are dearest, like one’s spouse. We have already shown above that this cannot mean a neglect or apathy toward one’s spouse, a view that would contradict what Paul even in

this same chapter about the concern one naturally has for one’s wife, “*but one who is married is concerned about the things of the world, how he may please his wife.*”⁸⁶ What this ‘foreshortened time’ does mean is that, in a very real sense, time itself has been compressed (the word translated ‘shortened’ literally means ‘compressed’). Compression, comments Grosheide, “is a permanent quality of time: it is compressed and that means that it should be lived intensely.



F. W. Grosheide (1881-1972)

ly. Time is compressed because we live in the period between the descent of the Holy Spirit and the return of Christ.”⁸⁷ The things that Paul says that believers are to view ‘as if they were not’ will, as Paul knows, continue in the lives of believers until the Lord returns, and he elsewhere addresses just *how* believers are to interact in these life events. “To be sure, Paul can see all the ordinary business of life in terms of ‘the present age,’

⁸⁴ Fee; 340.

⁸⁵ *Idem.*

⁸⁶ I Corinthians 7:33

⁸⁷ Grosheide, F. W. *Commentary on the First Epistle to the Corinthians* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company; 1979); 177.

and his constant plea is that Messiah-people learn to think and act as members of ‘the age to come.’”⁸⁸

The ‘now-and-not-yet’ tension of this present age and the age to come is woven throughout Paul’s letters and forms the underlying foundation of his worldview. The apostle views the present age – which he calls “*the end of the ages*” in I Corinthians 10:11 – as a time in which two realms exist on earth: the old creation that still lies under the corruption introduced by the sin of the one man, Adam; and the New Creation inaugurated through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the grave, and enlivened – literally – by the Holy Spirit poured out from heaven. What is particularly noteworthy in light of our previous survey of the different modes and methods by which the Church interacts with the surrounding culture, is the fact that Paul does not view either himself or any believer as any longer a part of the old creation. This is evident in numerous passages and is very pertinent to our overarching question concerning the Church in the world. The most familiar of these passages is, of course, II Corinthians 5.

Therefore, from now on, we regard no one according to the flesh. Even though we have known Christ according to the flesh, yet now we know Him thus no longer. Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; old things have passed away; behold, all things have become new.

(II Corinthians 5:16-17)

The idea of regarding someone *according to the flesh* is somewhat unclear, but Paul’s comparison with how we once regarded Jesus, *according to the flesh*, but regard Him thus no longer, seems to shed some light on how we are now to look upon our fellow humans. To say that we once regarded Jesus according to the flesh, contrasted with the fact that we regard Him no longer in that manner, can only refer to His pre-resurrection humanity (as ‘flesh’) contrasted with His resurrection body. Paul fleshes this out (pun intended) in I Corinthians 15 where he discusses the difference between our current mortal body – the body that Christ adopted in His Incarnation – and our promised immortal, resurrection body – the body that Jesus now has. To say, as he does here in II Corinthians 5, that we no longer regard *anyone* in that manner is a powerful

⁸⁸ Wright, N. T. *Paul and the Faithfulness of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press; 2013); 562.

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example of how Paul views the future age having invaded this present age. The ‘no one’ here is also further defined in the passage as referring to those who are “*in Christ*,” we no longer view fellow believers as *according to the flesh*, knowing them to be sealed by the Holy Spirit for the surety of the future, resurrection body. As for the unbelieving world, there is no point of contact between believers and unbelievers, the primary reason why Paul forbids believers from being “*unequally yoked with unbelievers*.”

Do not be unequally yoked together with unbelievers. For what fellowship has righteousness with lawlessness? And what communion has light with darkness? And what accord has Christ with Belial? Or what part has a believer with an unbeliever? (II Corinthians 6:14-15)

Again, it seems that statements like this one (and particularly the immediately following verses) advocate an *isolationist* perspective for the Church vis-à-vis the world.

Therefore,

“Come out from among them and be separate, says the Lord.

Do not touch what is unclean, and I will receive you.”

I will be a Father to you, and you shall be My sons and daughters,” Says the LORD Almighty.

(II Corinthians 6:17-18)

But Paul has already discountenanced an isolationist attitude toward the world, back in I Corinthians 5 where he discredited the idea of ‘going out of the world.’⁸⁹ The resolution lies in the verse between these two passages in II Corinthians 6, Paul’s explanation of the impossibility of fellowship between the children of God and the rest of humanity in its unbelief.

And what agreement has the temple of God with idols? For you are the temple of the living God.

As God has said:

“I will dwell in them and walk among them.

I will be their God, and they shall be My people.”

(II Corinthians 6:16)

The barrier that exists between believers and the Church on the one side, and the unbelieving world on the other, is the barrier that exists between a holy God and an

⁸⁹ I Corinthians 5:10

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unholy and unredeemed humanity. It is also, as evidenced by the contrasts Paul makes in verses 14 & 15, the uncrossable divide between Light and Darkness, between Christ and Belial, or Satan. This is in accordance with Paul's 'two kingdom' view of the present age, though he does not use the word 'kingdom' very much in his letters. When he does, however, it is apparent that he recognizes only two realms: the *domain of darkness* and the *kingdom of God's beloved Son*.

He has delivered us from the power of darkness and conveyed us into the kingdom of the Son of His love, in whom we have redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of sins.
(Colossians 1:13-14)

Paul does not call the realm of Satan's influence a 'kingdom,' but he does recognize the devil's *authority* – for that is the literal meaning of the word translated 'power' above – as still the guiding principle within the world outside the Church. It is this dark and rebellious principle that governs the behavior of unbelievers as it once governed the behavior of believers before their regeneration (and their transfer to Christ's kingdom).

And you He made alive, who were dead in trespasses and sins, in which you once walked according to the course of this world, according to the prince of the power of the air, the spirit who now works in the sons of disobedience, among whom also we all once conducted ourselves in the lusts of our flesh, fulfilling the desires of the flesh and of the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, just as the others.
(Ephesians 2:1-3)

This is the other side of Paul's dualistic worldview in the present age. Those who have been regenerated by the Holy Spirit are 'in Christ,' and as such are *children of light*; those who remain in unbelief (and so long as they remain in unbelief) remain *darkness*.

For you were once darkness, but now you are light in the Lord. Walk as children of light (for the fruit of the Spirit is in all goodness, righteousness, and truth), finding out what is acceptable to the Lord. And have no fellowship with the unfruitful works of darkness, but rather expose them. For it is shameful even to speak of those things which are done by them in secret.
(Ephesians 5:8-12)

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Again, Paul's terminology is important. He does not refer to unbelievers as *children* of darkness, but as darkness itself. Contrasting, believers are called *light* in the Lord and children of *light* rather than of *the* light. The dichotomy emphasizes the incompatibility of the two realms, and by extension, the citizens of the two realms. This contrast of citizenship is made explicit in Philippians.

*Brethren, join in following my example, and note those who so walk, as you have us for a pattern. For many walk, of whom I have told you often, and now tell you even weeping, that they are the enemies of the cross of Christ: whose end is destruction, whose god is their belly, and whose glory is in their shame – who set their mind on earthly things. For **our citizenship is in heaven**, from which we also eagerly wait for the Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ, who will transform our lowly body that it may be conformed to His glorious body, according to the working by which He is able even to subdue all things to Himself.* (Philippians 3:17-21)

Here again we see the 'now-and-not-yet' of Paul's theology: our citizenship is *now* in heaven, though *we await* the transformation of our bodies. Paul understands that what believers are *now* is entirely predicated on what Jesus *has done*, while the hope of believers is firmly grounded in what Jesus *will do*. This dichotomy must govern the Church's life in the world in this present age. This will not be an easy task, for at least two reasons. The first is perhaps the most obvious: we do not now see ourselves in the way Paul speaks of believers and the Church. Paul knows and readily acknowledges this fact, frequently admonishing us in his letters to *consider yourself* to be as God in Christ Jesus has now made you to be, though our thoughts and our actions often fail in this regard. This has more to do with the sanctification both of the believer and of the Church, a topic that pertained to our earlier studies in Pauline literature. It is the second difficulty that presents itself to this part of the Pauline Studies: the fact that there is a war going on, and we are a part of it.

This reality rounds out the Pauline worldview. His dichotomous perspective on the current age is by no means benign. Indeed, in perhaps the strongest argument against an *isolationist* interpretation of Paul, the apostle frequently speaks of '*our battle*'

and *'our warfare.'* The most famous of these references is in Ephesians 6, often referred to as the *'Armor of God'* passage.

Finally, my brethren, be strong in the Lord and in the power of His might. Put on the whole armor of God, that you may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil. For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this age, against spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenly places. Therefore take up the whole armor of God, that you may be able to withstand in the evil day, and having done all, to stand. Stand therefore, having girded your waist with truth, having put on the breastplate of righteousness, and having shod your feet with the preparation of the gospel of peace; above all, taking the shield of faith with which you will be able to quench all the fiery darts of the wicked one. And take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God.

(Ephesians 6:10-17)

The word translated *'wrestle'* in verse 12 is the Greek *palei* and is a *'hapax legomenon'* – it only occurs here in the New Testament. It is frequent in the ancient Greek, however, because it stands for *"a contest between two till one hurls the other down and holds him down."*⁹⁰ This described the ancient Olympic (and modern) sport of wrestling; hence the English translation. But the term itself simply signifies combat, and the context indicates that Paul is not referring to a one-on-one contest between Olympic athletes or the champions for two opposing armies. We wrestle *against the rulers, against the powers, against the world forces of this darkness, against the spiritual forces of wickedness in the heavenly places.*" This concept of combat as characteristic of the Church's sojourn in this world and in this age will be a major theme in the ensuing study. Here it is highlighted to emphasize the *'dark side'* of Paul's worldview. And at the heart of that worldview is the belief that there are forces, invisible yet powerful, that are at work in the world and that are the real enemies of the Church. These are the *powers and principalities* of which Paul speaks in several places in his letters. These are largely ignored in the modern context, viewed as ancient superstitions that need not trouble the modern, even Christian, mind.

⁹⁰ Robertson, A. T. *Word Pictures in the New Testament; Volume IV* (Nashville: Broadman Press; 1931); 550.

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It is evident that these powers and principalities do not refer to the human agencies that oppose Christianity, for these would be the *flesh and blood* that we do not wrestle against. Thus they must be spiritual forces, located as Paul puts it, *in the heavenlies*. As such, being unseen and unprovable through scientific observation, they no longer have any place in the Enlightenment and post-Enlightenment Western mind. Newbigin writes, “If I am not mistaken, most scholarly readers of the New Testament in the past 150 years have regarded all this language as something which we can for practical purposes ignore because it belongs to a thought-world that we have grown out of.”⁹¹ Newbigin points out that our ‘modern’ materialistic epistemology, in rejecting the reality of the *powers and principalities*, has done tremendous damage to our understanding of Paul and, therefore, to our understanding of the world in which we live. “The domination of a reductionist materialism, which supposed that when we had discovered the atomic and molecular and biological facts about any phenomenon we had explained it, has prevented us from discerning the realities that Paul and other New Testament writers are talking about, and they *are* realities.”⁹²

Thus we have at least a sketch of the Pauline worldview. On the one hand there is the New Creation, with believers no longer considering themselves *according to the flesh* but rather seeing themselves as the New Humanity in Christ, the Last Adam. This is Pauline to the core. On the other hand are the *powers and principalities* ranged against the Truth and against God’s people, the Church. This Pauline worldview elevates the whole matter above a mere conflict of cultures, changing the Church’s focus from avoiding, assimilation, or conquering culture, to rediscovering the truth concerning the forces that are at work in the real, though invisible, realm of the cosmos. Since this unseen realm has largely been reasoned out of the modern Western thought-life, we will spend the next lesson revisiting, and hopefully relearning, what the Holy Spirit has to say on the subject through His servant Paul.

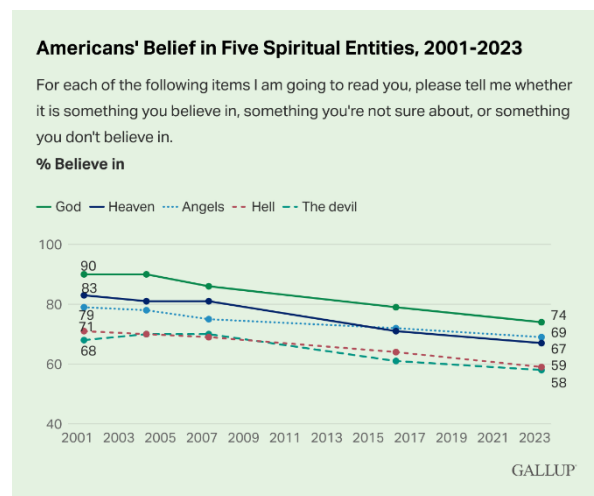
⁹¹ Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*; 200.

⁹² *Idem*. Italics original.

Lesson 5 – This Present Darkness
Text: Ephesians 6:10 - 20

*“Our policy, for the moment,
is to conceal ourselves.”*
(Screwtape)

Much has been written in public press concerning a rise in ‘spiritualism’ in the West – Europe and the United States – though in general this trend appears to represent nothing more than an inchoate individual desire to attain ‘self-realization,’ whatever that means. Eastern mysticism, yoga, meditation, all are on the rise while, conversely, actual belief in specific spiritual entities – God, the Devil, Heaven, etc. – is on a steady decline. As the graph from the Gallup polling organization shows, the ‘traditional’ spiritual realm is fading from public view at a very rapid pace.⁹³ The numbers are at least still above 50% across the board, but except for a slight bump in the belief in Heaven in 2007



(right before the Great Recession?), the trend is decidedly negative. Belief in a personal and ‘physical’ spirit realm – in God and the Devil, Heaven and Hell – is uniformly mocked in modern, Western society in such mainstream magazines as *Psychology Today*, with the authors not only scoffing at such beliefs but labeling them as both false and dangerous.

How can people seriously believe in the devil? The year is 2015, not 1315. And yet, the fact remains that tens of millions of Americans continue to believe that there is a magical, wicked, evil – oh, and smart – being out there doing magical, wicked, evil deeds and presiding over a fiery realm, where demons crawl and witches cackle. Oh, wait. No cackling witches. Just demons, right? According to a 2013 YouGov survey, 57% of Americans believe in the devil. And yes, that is 57% of American *adults* – not kindergarteners.

⁹³ [Belief in Five Spiritual Entities Edges Down to New Lows \(gallup.com\)](#). Accessed 06August2023.

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But hey, it's probably the same percentage among that demographic, too. Only a completely uninformed, poorly educated mind with little knowledge of things like evidence, could believe in the devil. Oh wait, scratch that. Actually, top neurosurgeons and Supreme Court justices can. And millions upon millions of other well-educated, upstanding men and women, too. But there is no such thing as the devil, just as there is no such thing as fairies, imps, or goblins. The two largest religions in the world—Christianity and Islam—teach that there is a devil. And they are wrong. There is no evidence for such a thing. Not a shred. It is simply something that germinated from the unscientific, irrational minds of early humans who tried their best to explain why bad things happen to good people, why good people sometimes do bad things, and why there is so much needless suffering in the world.⁹⁴

Mockery and ridicule are powerful weapons in an age where critical thought is so rare, the post-modern age in a nutshell. However, the attack on the reality of a spiritual realm and spiritual beings was launched much earlier in the modern era, but men such as Voltaire and Jefferson and, later, Darwin and Freud. British writer Gerald



Gerald Heard (1889-1971)

Heard commented, “Newton banished God from nature, Darwin banished Him from life, and now Freud has banished Him from His last stronghold, the soul.”⁹⁵ But in banishing God from Western scientific and psychological thought, these men – and many others in support – also banished the whole realm of spiritual beings in their increasingly materialistic universe. For a long time, orthodox Christianity

fought a rearguard action against the surging tide of unbelief and incredulity. But even in the late 19th Century we find more and more leading Christian scholars abandoning the ‘scientifically unsupportable’ notions of demons and the Devil. James S. Stewart noted seventy years ago that “St. Paul’s ‘principalities and powers’ and ‘spiritual forces of evil’ are now known, we are told, to have been mere apocalyptic imagination.”⁹⁶ These two men lived in an age – and one not so long ago in the grand span of human

⁹⁴ Zuckerman, Phil “The Devil? Seriously?” *Psychology Today*. [The Devil? Seriously? | Psychology Today](#). Accessed 06August2023.

⁹⁵ Quoted by James S. Stewart, “On a Neglected Emphasis in New Testament Theology” *Scottish Journal of Theology*: Vol. IV. No. 3 (Sept. 1951); 292.

⁹⁶ *Idem*.

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human thought – when a person could still defend belief in spiritual beings and a spiritual world behind this physical one, without fear of ridicule and scorn, at least not from the general public. Today, outside the Bible Belt of the Deep South, referring to God in the public forum is strictly forbidden, while speaking of the Devil or of demons is viewed as lunacy and superstition. As the esteemed psychologist quoted above notes, “This is 2015, not 1315.”



James S. Stewart (1896-1990)

It is also not AD 50, the height of Paul’s ministry and around the time he wrote most of his letters. Clearly if mankind’s belief in the ‘supernatural’ was wrong-headed in 1315, it must have been downright primitive in Paul’s time. Against the forces of modernity – modern science, modern evolutionary biology, modern psychiatry – theologians retreated almost *en masse* into a rewriting of Pauline history, telling us that the apostle was merely influenced by his culture and absorbed in his writing by the vivid, otherworldly literary genre of *apocalyptic* that was prevalent in his day. Along with Jesus’ miracles and all mention of Satan in the four Gospels, Paul’s references to spiritual forces – under a myriad of names to be investigated in this lesson – were relegated first to a far-secondary importance in the New Testament message, and finally, as the British say, to the dustbin. But can we do this and still maintain any contact with the world and message of Jesus and His Apostles in the pages of the New Testament? Can the spiritual canvas against which they lived and taught be removed by our modern skepticism, while the portrait of their teaching remains? Speaking of these ‘enlightened’ theologians of the 19th and early 20th Centuries, Stewart writes, “They have misunderstood as secondary and extraneous elements in the primitive Christian proclamation that in fact are integral and basic components of the Gospel.”⁹⁷ In their attempt to ‘save’ Jesus and Paul from the superstitious ignorance of their time, skeptical Enlightenment theologians and their heirs have utterly lost the heart of the Gospel, the *power* of God unto salvation not merely for human sinners, but against a vast – and very real – array of spiritual

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*; 294.

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forces that inhabit the heavenlies. The victory of skepticism has radically and perhaps irretrievably altered the 'Christian' worldview.

This is true because even a cursory reading of the Gospels and of Paul will reveal that the existence, and hostility, of an invisible, spiritual realm and of spiritual beings that inhabit that realm and influence this, is not ancillary to the biblical message; it is central. Ephesians 6 alone should be sufficient to convince us that the reality of this unseen realm lies at the very core of Paul's understanding both of what God has done in Christ Jesus, and what is left for the Church to be and to do in the world.

Finally, my brethren, be strong in the Lord and in the power of His might. Put on the whole armor of God, that you may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil. For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this age, against spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenly places.

(Ephesians 6:10-12)

Paul's understanding of the meaning and impact of Christ's death and resurrection is also couched in terms of victory over spiritual forces and not merely as a means of securing (or offering) salvation for individual sinners.

In Him you were also circumcised with the circumcision made without hands, by putting off the body of the sins of the flesh, by the circumcision of Christ, buried with Him in baptism, in which you also were raised with Him through faith in the working of God, who raised Him from the dead. And you, being dead in your trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, He has made alive together with Him, having forgiven you all trespasses, having wiped out the handwriting of requirements that was against us, which was contrary to us. And He has taken it out of the way, having nailed it to the cross. Having disarmed principalities and powers, He made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them in it.

(Colossians 2:11-15)

As we will see in this lesson, the presence of invisible, yet powerful, spiritual beings behind the events of this life – not the least the events of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection, is so integral to Paul's teaching that to remove it as 'apocalyptic' or primitive superstitious would be to gut the Pauline message itself. "Although he is not enamored with



Clinton E. Arnold (b. 1958)

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speculating about the demonic realm, he does maintain a firm belief in the reality of hostile powers that are integral to the present evil age.”⁹⁸ Nowhere in either the gospels or in the Pauline literature is a detailed exposition given of the identity of these spiritual forces, though there is equally no doubt of their reality in the minds of the New Testament writers and of Jesus Himself. The question to the modern reader is whether *their* belief in the reality of such ‘powers and principalities’ requires *our* belief in the same, in spite of – and in direct opposition to – the allegedly scientific proofs of their non-exist-



C. S. Lewis (1898-1963)

ence. Can we dispense with the spiritual realm without fatally damaging both the content of the Christian Gospel and the purpose of the Church in the world? C. S. Lewis, in his famous *Screwtape Letters*, has the demonic mentor counseling his nephew and charge, that unbelief in the existence of their evil existence is the preferred demonic strategy in the modern age, “Our policy, for the moment, is to conceal ourselves... We

are really faced with a cruel dilemma. When the humans disbelieve in our existence we lose all the pleasing results of direct terrorism and we make no magicians. On the other hand, when they believe in us, we cannot make them materialists and skeptics.”⁹⁹

The stakes are high in this matter. On the one hand, and rather obviously, if the New Testament witness to spiritual realities beyond and behind the visible world is merely a product of the writers’ collective and primitive imagination, then both the purpose and the results of Jesus’ earthly ministry need to be revised, a revision for which the New Testament itself will offer little assistance. But on the other hand, if the biblical perspective on the ‘powers and principalities’ was *real* in the 1st Century, there needs to be a very solid and *biblical* basis for saying that it is no longer real in the 21st. If it remains true, however, then Paul’s admonition that “*we wrestle not against flesh and blood*” means a past-due assessment and reorientation of the modern Church’s place

⁹⁸ Arnold, Clinton E. “Returning to the Domain of the Powers: *Stoichea* as Evil Spirits in Galatians 4:3,9” *Novum Testamentum*. Jan. 1996, Vol. 38, Fasc.1; 68.

⁹⁹ Lewis, C. S. *The Screwtape Letters* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco; 1996); 31.

and purpose in the world. It may be special pleading, but if the biblical portrayal of the Devil as *“the most cunning of God’s creatures”*¹⁰⁰ is accurate, then retreating into the realm of credulity is just the tactic one would expect from a demonic power who *“masquerades as an angel of light.”*¹⁰¹ The result of the Church assigning the spiritual realm of darkness and its inhabitants to the realm of ancient, primitive superstition is to render the Christian witness impotent by directing it against a false foe, be it social action, moral education, or political legislation.¹⁰²

It is true that in the Western world the visible evidence of a demonic influence in the world is almost non-existent. We read of the episodes in the gospels and the Book of Acts, in which Jesus and His disciples encountered people who were visibly impacted by demon possession, and we wonder why, if the demonic realm is truly real, do we not see such manifestations today. One response is to realize that the presence of Jesus, and the essential nativity of the Church’s ministry, brought forth a more virulent strain of visible demonic activity not seen either during the Old Testament era nor in the centuries since. In addition, to measure the reality of the demonic realm by the number of visible episodes of demonic activity is to forget the biblical characteristic of the Devil as ‘cunning.’ Lewis is probably on to something when he has Screwtape acknowledge that a too-visible activity will prevent humans from dismissing the demonic altogether as the pursue materialistic and ‘scientific’ explanations for natural phenomena. Paul himself seems to transition in his own letters from the demonic as a visible, episodic manifestation of possession and direct, individual influence to speak of the underlying realm of darkness that lies behind and guides the visible world forces that most of mankind takes for normal life. “The truth is that...Paul has in view demonic intelligences of a much higher order than the ‘devils’ who possessed the poor disordered souls that meet

¹⁰⁰ Genesis 3:1

¹⁰¹ II Corinthians 11:14

¹⁰² Such activities constitute the bulk of Screwtape’s ‘advice’ to his charge, Wormwood.

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us in the Gospel pages. These are *cosmic* spirit forces which possess and control not only individual human lives but the very course of the universe.”¹⁰³

This is no less than Jesus’ recognition that those earthly powers that were conspiring His death were but minions of the greater, more devious forces that were working in the shadows. Though speaking to the Sanhedrin and the earthly powers of the Jewish hierarchy, Jesus nevertheless speaks of a greater power that motivated them, though they themselves were probably unaware.

Then Jesus said to the chief priests, captains of the temple, and the elders who had come to Him, “Have you come out, as against a robber, with swords and clubs? When I was with you daily in the temple, you did not try to seize Me. But this is your hour, and the power of darkness.”

(Luke 22:52-53)

Considering Jesus’ comment alongside Paul’s de-emphasis on the visible manifestation of demon activity, and coupled with the apostle’s frequent and consistent reference to behind-the-scenes powers at work in the world and universe, it seems reasonable to conclude that both believers’ and unbelievers’ fixation on the visible episodes of demon possession not only misses the point, but plays directly into the hands and purpose of the ‘powers and principalities’ themselves, and especially into those of the “*prince of the power of the air,*” the Devil himself. Commenting on the episodic testimony of the Gospels, Stewart writes, “It is quite crucial to observe that in the New Testament these visible historic forces always appear as mere agents of other invisible powers incalculably more sinister and dangerous.”¹⁰⁴ Thus, far greater than visible demon possession are both the challenge and the threat posed by the “*spiritual forces of wickedness in the heavenly places*” that are the Church’s real enemies.¹⁰⁵

Paul’s comprehensive understanding of God’s ultimate work in Jesus Christ includes not only his *Adam* Christology and his *Abraham* Christology, but also a *Cosmic* Christology in which the eternal Son of God, become Son of Man through the Incarna-

¹⁰³ Macgregor, G. H. C. “Principalities and Powers: The Cosmic Background of Paul’s Thought” *New Testament Studies*. Vol. 1 Issue 1 (Sept. 1954); 19.

¹⁰⁴ Stewart; 295

¹⁰⁵ Ephesians 6:12

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tion, has by His death and resurrection set in motion *cosmic* reconciliation and restoration. This is summarized most clearly in two Pauline passages: Romans 8 and I Corinthians 15, though within each passage there is a very great depth of revelation.

For the earnest expectation of the creation eagerly waits for the revealing of the sons of God. For the creation was subjected to futility, not willingly, but because of Him who subjected it in hope; because the creation itself also will be delivered from the bondage of corruption into the glorious liberty of the children of God. For we know that the whole creation groans and labors with birth pangs together until now. (Romans 8:19-22)

But now Christ is risen from the dead, and has become the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep. For since by man came death, by Man also came the resurrection of the dead. For as in Adam all die, even so in Christ all shall be made alive. But each one in his own order: Christ the firstfruits, afterward those who are Christ's at His coming. Then comes the end, when He delivers the kingdom to God the Father, when He puts an end to all rule and all authority and power. For He must reign till He has put all enemies under His feet. The last enemy that will be destroyed is death. For "He has put all things under His feet." But when He says "all things are put under Him," it is evident that He who put all things under Him is excepted. Now when all things are made subject to Him, then the Son Himself will also be subject to Him who put all things under Him, that God may be all in all. (I Corinthians 15:20-28)

It was granted to Paul to elaborate and deepen Christ's post-Resurrection words to His disciples in the upper room, "All authority has been given to me in heaven and on earth,"¹⁰⁶ and the apostle understood Christ's risen dominion to be "far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and every name that is named, not only in this age, but also in the one to come."¹⁰⁷ Christ's Lordship over the universe is not often spoken about in modern, Western evangelicalism where the emphasis over the past 150 years or so has been more and more on individual salvation, personal evangelism. While this activity certainly has a place within the Christian mission in the world, to neglect the remarkable frequency with which Paul speaks of the "powers and principalities" – not to mention the *thrones, dominions, elements, etc.* – is to completely lose sight of the apostle's perspective both of what God has done in Christ and what God is doing in His Church *in the world*. "The participation of the resurrected Jesus in the omnipotent Lordship of God

¹⁰⁶ Matthew 28:18

¹⁰⁷ Ephesians 1:21



Wolfhart Pannenberg (1928-2014)

means Lordship not only over his church, but also over the cosmos.”¹⁰⁸ Thus, in order to begin to understand the Church’s role in the world – the Church as the *Body of Christ* – we must begin to grasp what the apostle has to say concerning Christ’s Lordship over the world, the entire *cosmos*. This means digging deeper into those passages, and they are many, in which Paul speaks of cosmic forces under many different terms, *powers and principalities* being just one example.

This is simply because Jesus did not merely come to save sinners; He came to defeat the powers of darkness; powers that our (post)modern Western world deny even exist; powers that that modern Western evangelicalism has largely ignored. “The really tragic force of the dilemma of history and of the human predicament is not answered by any theology which speaks of the Cross as a revelation of love and mercy – and goes no further. But the primitive proclamation went much further. It spoke of an objective transaction which had changed the human situation and indeed the universe, the *kosmos* itself. It spoke of the decisive irrevocable defeat of the powers of darkness.”¹⁰⁹

As we have often seen regarding other matters, Paul’s thought on these ‘powers’ is not easy to systematize. He uses many different terms without providing definitions of each, nor any relationship – if there is any – between them. He speaks of the *form of this world* and the *spirit of the world* as well as the *elements of this world*. He speaks of *rulers, thrones, dominions, powers, and principalities* without providing an organizational flowchart as to which of these is higher than the others. This itself is an indication that such organization, which has been attempted by theologians as notable as Thomas Aquinas, is off the mark at the outset. Modern scholars have attempted to determine the source material from which Paul derived his understanding of the metaphysics of the ancient world, and the terminology he uses to describe it. The most common ‘source’ is believed to be Jewish apocalyptic, though Chris Forbes has shown convincingly that no

¹⁰⁸ Pannenberg, Wolfhart *Jesus God and Man* (London: SCM Press LTD; 1968);378.

¹⁰⁹ Stewart; 294.

such correlation exists. “The terminology with which Paul generally prefers to describe ‘spiritual beings’ is deliberately abstract and impersonal. Despite claims to the contrary, certain features of it have little demonstrable background in pre-Christian Jewish thought.”¹¹⁰

What is significant about Paul’s discussion of the metaphysical powers is that he does not use the typical ‘angels’ and ‘demons’ nearly as much as other New Testament writers, preferring a blend of words that seem to emphasize an at least former or partial *authority* over the world and the cosmos. Words such as ‘powers’ and ‘principalities’ and ‘dominions’ carry a much more authoritative and even oppressive connotation than ‘angels’ or even ‘demons.’ There is good reason to conclude that in almost all cases in the Pauline letters, these references *do* refer to angelic (demonic) beings, but the terms the apostle uses bring the focus away from the ontological character of these beings and toward the interactive, authoritative function of these beings vis-à-vis the world and its inhabitants. It is quite possible, even likely that it is to spiritual beings that Paul refers when he writes of “*the wisdom which none of the rulers of this age has understood; for if they had understood it, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory.*”¹¹¹ While this usage of ‘rulers’ might refer to men like Pilate and Caiaphas and Herod, it fits better with the general use Paul makes of the term, and the others noted above, to refer to powers that lie behind their earthly instruments; powers that, in this case, brought about their own destruction when they crucified the Lord.

Paul does not descend into a cosmic dualism, in which the powers of darkness are equal in strength to the powers of light. No, for Paul every one of these dark powers is not only subjected to Jesus Christ and defeated by Him, they were created by Him!

For by Him all things were created that are in heaven and that are on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or principalities or powers. All things were created through Him and for Him.
(Colossians 1:16)

¹¹⁰ Forbes, Chris “Paul’s Principalities and Powers: Demythologizing Apocalyptic?” *Journal for the Study of the New Testament*. Vol. 23. Issue 82 (July 2001); 62-63.

¹¹¹ I Corinthians 2:8

Thus there is never any danger in Paul that the conflict between the forces of Light in Jesus Christ and the forces of darkness will be an even battle. In the same letter to the Colossians, and only a few verses later, Paul asserts the victory of Jesus over these same powers, and that through the instrument with which they attempted to defeat and destroy Him.

*And you, being dead in your trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, He has made alive together with Him, having forgiven you all trespasses, having wiped out the handwriting of requirements that was against us, which was contrary to us. And He has taken it out of the way, having nailed it to the cross. **Having disarmed principalities and powers, He made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them in it.*** (Colossians 2:13-15)

Paul also does not descend into speculation as to the identity and character of these powers and refuses to provide his readers with a systematic description of the beings to which he refers as ‘powers’ or ‘principalities’ or ‘dominions,’ etc. The leader of this realm of dark spirits is, without doubt in Paul, Satan himself. But even here Paul refuses to answer our curiosities about the *prince of the power of the air*, merely assuring his readers that “*God will soon crush Satan under your feet.*”¹¹² Having enumerated the references that Paul makes to Satan and to the other spiritual beings, Forbes comments, “What is significant here is not the raw number of instances, but rather how little we learn of any active role for ‘spirits’ and Satan in Pauline theology beyond the general-purpose role of opposition.”¹¹³ This is perhaps the most important point: though these powers of darkness have been defeated in Christ through the Cross, they are still at large and still array themselves as the enemies of Christ and His people. This is another element of Paul’s eschatological ‘now-and-not-yet’ perspective, applying in this case to a realm of the created universe that we humans cannot see, but which nonetheless is very real. To deny their reality on the basis of modern ‘science’ is to decisively play into the hands of these forces.

¹¹² Romans 16:20

¹¹³ Forbes; 67.

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A full and in-depth exegesis of every passage in which Paul refers to these dark powers, in one term or a series of terms, is beyond the scope of this study, though it is well worth the effort to bring the various passages together under single consideration. Since the emphasis of this study is the Church in the World, it will suffice to review how the apostle uses the various terms in his letters in order to inculcate within the minds of his readers – including modern believers – both the presence and the reality of these opposing forces. The main problem we have in exegeting Paul's view of these cosmic forces of darkness is that the same Greek word is often not consistently rendered in the English. Therefore we will look at the Greek words he employs, and consider the root meaning of these words as well as the common English translations. There is no particular order in the following summary, except for the final word analyzed, *stoichea* or 'elements.'

Archai/Archōn

This is the common Greek word group for 'ruler' or 'rule' and is most frequently translated 'principality/ies.' The term *archōn* is very frequent in both biblical and non-biblical Greek with reference to a personal ruler, a king or emperor. It is perhaps the derivation of this word, stemming from the Greek word *archei* which means 'beginning,' that the derivative terms came to signify those who were 'first' in society and, cosmologically, those beings were first in Creation – the 'principalities.' The term in both Greek philosophy and Jewish theology pertained to spiritual forces that exercised authority and power over realms and regions of the earth – the 'guardian angels,' as it were, of nations. We encounter this concept, for instance, in Daniel 10 where we find Michael, the archangel – traditionally held to be the guardian angel of Israel – giving battle against the '*prince of the kingdom of Persia,*' which is a reference to another '*archon*' whose dominion was the land and empire of Persia.

Then he said to me, "Do not fear, Daniel, for from the first day that you set your heart to understand, and to humble yourself before your God, your words were heard; and I have come because of your words. But the prince of the kingdom of Persia withstood me twenty-one days; and be-

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hold, Michael, one of the chief princes, came to help me, for I had been left alone there with the kings of Persia. (Daniel 10:12-13)

Exousias

This word group is often coupled in Paul with the associated *exousias*, or ‘authorities,’ often translated by the English ‘powers.’ This coupling would seem to confirm the idea of spiritual beings or realms that have authority or jurisdiction over individual nations or peoples, probably those beings that were worshipped as the ‘national gods’ of the pagan nations. Paul brings the couplet together in several places, and a cursory review of these passages shows both the inveterate opposition of the ‘principalities and powers’ to the people of God, on the one hand, and their ultimate impotence against Christ and His people – indeed, their complete subjection to Christ - on the other.

*To me, who am less than the least of all the saints, this grace was given, that I should preach among the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ, and to make all see what is the fellowship of the mystery, which from the beginning of the ages has been hidden in God who created all things through Jesus Christ; to the intent that now the manifold wisdom of God might be made known by the church to the **principalities and powers** in the heavenly places...* (Ephesians 3:8-10)

*Finally, my brethren, be strong in the Lord and in the power of His might. Put on the whole armor of God, that you may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil. For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but **against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this age, against spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenly places.*** (Ephesians 6:10-12)

*He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation. For by Him all things were created that are in heaven and that are on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions **or principalities or powers.** All things were created through Him and for Him. And He is before all things, and in Him all things consist. And He is the head of the body, the church, who is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, that in all things He may have the preeminence.* (Colossians 1:15-18)

And you, being dead in your trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, He has made alive together with Him, having forgiven you all trespasses, having wiped out the handwriting of requirements that was against us, which was contrary to us. And He has taken it out of the way,

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*having nailed it to the cross. Having disarmed **principalities and powers**, He made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them in it.* (Colossians 2:13-15)

*For I am persuaded that neither death nor life, nor angels **nor principalities nor powers**, nor things present nor things to come, nor height nor depth, nor any other created thing, shall be able to separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord.* (Romans 8:38-39)¹¹⁴

The passage in Colossians 1:16 also mentions “*thrones and dominions*” – the Greek *thronoi* and *kuriotaites* – which may be references again to the authority that these beings have over regions (realms) of the spirit world, or their authoritative position behind the earthly rulers and domains that oppose God’s people throughout the ages. What is consistent in Paul’s usage of these terms is the supremacy of Jesus Christ – *both* the pre-incarnate agent of Creation *and* the resurrected Lord of the universe – over all such spiritual powers, whatever their exact ontology or function. This fact is something that Paul earnestly desires the Ephesians to know with certainty.

*Therefore I also, after I heard of your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love for all the saints, do not cease to give thanks for you, making mention of you in my prayers: that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give to you the spirit of wisdom and revelation in the knowledge of Him, the eyes of your understanding being enlightened; that you may know what is the hope of His calling, what are the riches of the glory of His inheritance in the saints, and what is the exceeding greatness of His power toward us who believe, according to the working of His mighty power which He worked in Christ when He raised Him from the dead and seated Him at His right hand in the heavenly places, **far above all principality and power and might and dominion, and every name that is named**, not only in this age but also in that which is to come.* (Ephesians 1:15-21)

In this particular passage we see most clearly the importance of this Pauline perspective regarding the forces of an unseen spiritual world that truly constitute the Church’s enemies. In verses 22 & 23, immediately following his statement regarding Jesus’ exaltation above all such beings, Paul provides one of the most enigmatic of his statements concerning the Church, a statement that ties together the life of the Church and the spiritual forces against which she must wrestle.

¹¹⁴ Romans 8:38 has some textual variants, with *dunameis* in some manuscripts and *exousia*, the more common term, in others.

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And He put all things under His feet, and gave Him to be head over all things to the church, which is His body, the fullness of Him who fills all in all. (Ephesians 1:22-23)

This statement is echoed in Colossians 1:18, which also immediately follows a passage in which Christ's supremacy over the "*thrones or dominions or principalities or powers.*"

And He is the head of the body, the church, who is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, that in all things He may have the preeminence. (Colossians 1:18)

It is in this latter passage that we see again the connection between the existence of these spiritual forces - and their subjection to Jesus Christ - and the life and purpose of the Church. Paul in both the Ephesians passage and this one in Colossians, inexorably links the exaltation of Jesus Christ with His Headship over the Church, even calling her "*the fulness of Him who fills all in all.*" The unavoidable implication is that Christ's dominion over the powers of the cosmos is exercised *through the Church* of which He is Head. This is more explicit in the Colossians passage.

For it pleased the Father that in Him all the fullness should dwell, and by Him to reconcile all things to Himself, by Him, whether things on earth or things in heaven, having made peace through the blood of His cross. (Colossians 1:19-20)

If we span the biblical spectrum from Jesus' triumph over the powers of darkness (Col. 2:15) to the encouraging word that God will shortly crush Satan under the feet of believers (Rom. 16:20), we have the full range of the 'now-and-not-yet' of Paul's ecclesiological eschatology. What is complete in Christ Jesus is being completed by Him through His Church. P. T. Forsyth sees in this a great encouragement to the Church in any age, as well as the purpose of the Church



P. T. Forsyth (1848-1921)

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in every age. “The world’s awful need is less than Christ’s awful victory. And the devils we meet were all fore-damned in the Satan He ruined.”¹¹⁵

¹¹⁵ Quoted by Stewart; 299.

Excursus on *stoicheia*

In his letters both to the Galatian and to the Colossians churches, Paul uses a word quite significant both in ancient Jewish as well as pagan cosmology and astrology: *stoicheia* and its cognates. The word is generally translated by the English 'element' or 'elementary,' and is the root word for the study of Stoichiometry in Chemistry – the study of the reactions of chemical elements. The manner in which the apostle uses this word group indicates his understanding of a primeval angelic power(s) or being(s) that lay beneath and behind the operation of this world, especially in its rebellion against God. The key passages are as follows:

*Now I say that the heir, as long as he is a child, does not differ at all from a slave, though he is master of all, but is under guardians and stewards until the time appointed by the father. Even so we, when we were children, were in bondage under the **elements** of the world. But when the fullness of the time had come, God sent forth His Son, born of a woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law, that we might receive the adoption as sons.*

(Galatians 4:1-5)

*But then, indeed, when you did not know God, you served those which by nature are not gods. But now after you have known God, or rather are known by God, how is it that you turn again to the weak and beggarly **elements**, to which you desire again to be in bondage? You observe days and months and seasons and years. I am afraid for you, lest I have labored for you in vain.*

(Galatians 4:8-11)

*See to it that there is no one who takes you captive through philosophy and empty deception in accordance with human tradition, in accordance with the **elementary principles** of the world, rather than in accordance with Christ. For in Him all the fullness of Deity dwells in bodily form, and in Him you have been made complete, and He is the head over every ruler and authority...*

(Colossians 2:8-10)

*If you have died with Christ to the **elementary principles** of the world, why, as if you were living in the world, do you submit yourself to decrees, such as, "Do not handle, do not taste, do not touch!" (which all refer to things destined to perish with use) – in accordance with the commandments and teachings of man? These are matters which do have the appearance of wisdom in self-made religion and humility and severe treatment of the body, but are of no value against fleshly indulgence.*

(Colossians 2:20-21)

Another use of the *stoicheia* word group is by the author of the letter to the Hebrews, though in this case it seems to refer only adjectivally to basic Christian teachings rather than a spiritual force or power.

*For though by this time you ought to be teachers, you have need again for someone to teach you the **elementary principles** of the actual words of God, and you have come to need milk and not solid food. For everyone who partakes only of milk is unacquainted with the word of righteousness, for he is an infant. But solid food is for the mature, who because of practice have their senses trained to distinguish between good and evil.* (Hebrews 5:12-14)

Finally, we have Peter's use of the word with reference to the final purification of the earth, seemingly using the word to describe the basic (and literal) physical elements of the earth.

*But the day of the Lord will come as a thief in the night, in which the heavens will pass away with a great noise, and the **elements** will melt with fervent heat; both the earth and the works that are in it will be burned up. Therefore, since all these things will be dissolved, what manner of persons ought you to be in holy conduct and godliness, looking for and hastening the coming of the day of God, because of which the heavens will be dissolved, being on fire, and the **elements** will melt with fervent heat?* (II Peter 3:10-12)

Paul's usage of this word family is intriguing to scholars due to the fact that the *stoicheia*, more so than the other terms Paul uses with reference to spiritual beings, reaches back into ancient astronomy and astrology. Clinton Arnold notes, "in the Greek Magical Papyri, the term *stoicheia* is used most commonly in connection with the stars and/or the spirit entities, or gods, they represent. In a related sense, *stoicheia* was also used to refer to the 36 decans that rule over every 10 degrees of the heavens."¹¹⁶ This latter reference is related to the zodiac and to astrological calculations such as modern horoscopes.

Paul's reference to the *stoicheia* in Galatians 4:3 is instructive, as he refers to having been *held in bondage* to the *stoicheia* before the advent of Jesus Christ. This personalizes the *stoicheia* as masters, and not merely physical elements. This is confirmed in

¹¹⁶ Arnold; 57-58.

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verses 8-9 of the same chapter, where Paul writes, “*However, at that time when you did not know God, you were slaves to those which by nature are no gods.*” (4:8) These ‘no gods’ are then further defined in verse 9 as “*weak and worthless elemental things, to which you desire to be enslaved all over again.*” A parallel passage, though not using the *stoicheia* root, is I Corinthians 12:2, “*You know that when you were pagans you were led astray to the dumb idols, however you were led.*” Arnold concludes, “In my analysis, the contextual evidence points strongly in favor of the view that the *stoicheia* are angelic beings...In denying that these beings are gods, Paul is not denying that they have a real existence, only their claim to be gods.”¹¹⁷

What is fascinating about Paul’s treatment of this word group is how he links the Mosaic Law in the same, or at least very similar, category with the *stoicheia* of the pagans, for it was to the Mosaic Law that the Galatians were being tempted to go. To equate the Law with the *stoicheia* of paganism is not, it would seem, consistent with what the apostles has to say about the Law in Romans, that it is “*holy, and the commandment is holy and righteous and good.*”¹¹⁸ Thus what Paul is saying here in Galatians 4 is no different than what he says in Romans 7 – the problem is not that the Law itself was evil, the problem is that the Law was powerless to reverse the corruption of both the individual soul and the entire world order due to sin. To return to obedience to the Law, therefore, was tantamount to returning to the former pagan practices that had enslaved the Galatians. In other words, the Jews were as much enslaved by the Law as the Gentiles by their pagan idolatry; both constituted *stoicheia*.

From the ancient literature, as well as Paul’s own usage of the term, it would seem that the *stoicheia* word group is taking us back to an almost primordial paganism, literally the ‘elemental’ forms of human unbelief and rebellion. Arnold points out in his article that the ancient usage of *stoicheia* was most often associated with such natural phenomena as the four elements (earth – air – water – fire), the seven visible planets,

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*; 60.

¹¹⁸ Romans 7:12

and the stars in their zodiacal constellations.¹¹⁹ Symbols representing these elemental particles were often the earliest forms of a written language, and the word *stoicheia* is also found used with reference to the letters of an alphabet.

Jewish tradition link the *stoicheia* with the hostile angelic beings who had dominion over the other nations of the world and were inveterate in their enmity towards God's people. Paul's linking of the Law with the *stoicheia* would have been just one of many incendiary comments from his pen as far as his unbelieving Jewish countrymen were concerned. But it seems for Paul that any reference to the *present evil age* was a reference to the old aeon under the bondage of the primal, angelic (demonic) hosts. The age of Christ is vastly different. Referring to Paul's phrase *stoicheia tou kosmou* – 'elements of the cosmos' – Arnold writes, "By the addition of *tou kosmou* Paul places the *stoicheia* into his two-age framework and make them a part of what he has described before as 'the present evil age. This accentuates the demonic character of these angels who will not have a share in the age to come. It also brings these powers into close affiliation with the other forces of this age: especially flesh and sin."¹²⁰

What is most pertinent about this analysis is the abiding nature of what we might call *stoicheia* religions throughout the ages of humanity, right up into the present. Paul's concern with the Galatians was their turning to the Mosaic Law, which would be to them a return to the *stoicheia*. But the Colossian were under a different threat, one that tempted them to adopt the false tenets of *philosophy and empty deception*.¹²¹ To Paul it made little difference whether a believer returned to bondage to the Law or to ancient pagan idolatry, which "suggests that the *stoicheia* are demonic forces which hold in thrall the minds of men and women who follow their dictates...The negative evaluation points much more in the direction of evil spirits working their blinding, corrupting, and deceiving influence on Jew and Gentile alike to enslave them and keep them from a knowledge of God and the truth."¹²²

¹¹⁹ Arnold, p. 56, n5.

¹²⁰ *Ibid.*; 65.

¹²¹ Colossians 2:8

¹²² Arnold; 67.

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What is consistent throughout the ages, however, is the tendency for societies to ‘return’ to the *stoicheia*, manifested in an increasing observation of astrology, the zodiac, horoscopes and the like. It is as if the fall of man incorporated something within the human DNA that has a magnetic attraction to the planets and the stars as alternative ‘gods’ to the one, true God. We even characterize people as ‘saturnine,’ ‘mercurial,’ or ‘jovial’ – and speak of Venus and Mars as the gods of love and war (and female and male). All such philosophies of men are “*weak and beggarly*” according to Paul, and all such demonic influences were defeated by Jesus Christ on the Cross.¹²³

Defeated, yet still present; wounded, yet still dangerous. “For Paul, the *stoicheia* were an integral part of the present evil age and used a variety of means to hold humanity in bondage and blind people to the revelation of Jesus Christ as proclaimed in the gospel. For Gentiles, they accomplished their objective through posing as gods and goddesses and soliciting cultic worship. For Jews, they were associated with the law in the same way as the power of sin and were agents of slavery under the old covenant.”¹²⁴ We do not know the exact relationship between the *stoicheia* and the ‘principalities and powers,’ but we do know that they are real, that they opposed the work of grace, and that believers and the Church *wrestle* against them.

¹²³ Cp. Colossians 2:14-15

¹²⁴ Arnold; 75.

Lesson 6 – Speaking Truth to Power
Text: I Corinthians 1:20 – 25; 15:25 – 28

*“The natural disposition of all human power,
is to its abuse.”*

(James Davison Hunter)

Bayard Rustin, an early Civil Rights leader, is accredited with the famous phrase, “Speaking Truth to Power.” The context was the resistance of the Civil Rights Movement in its very early days, to the entrenched discrimination of both the society and the government of the United States. The phrase, however, has had a much broader scope than just the Civil Rights Movement, and has come to represent all non-violent protest and resistance against institutionalized power, wheth-



Bayard Rustin (1912-87)

er political, religious, social, or economic. A more contemporary example is the Occupy Movement, in which protesters ‘occupy’ public places and buildings in order to ‘speak truth to power’ in its excess and abuse. Thus in September, 2011, thousands of protesters descended on Wall Street and set up a tent camp. That particular protest only lasted fifty-nine days, but it spawned similar ‘sit-ins’ and ‘occupy’ movements across the country and the world. Looking back from the perspective of more than a decade, it is hard to see that the Movement had any tangible impact on Wall Street, though from a longer hindsight one might credit Rustin’s speaking truth to power with the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and subsequent advancements in racial equality both in the U. S. and the world.¹²⁵

This mantra of 20th Century liberal progressivism has often been taken up by professing Christian organizations and churches, though primarily among the mainline denominations and within American Catholicism. A 2019 article in *Christianity Today* – no longer the conservative vehicle of orthodoxy it was when founded by Carl Henry in

¹²⁵ Rustin also advocated vigorously for an end to apartheid in South Africa, which did happen peacefully through legislation in 1991. Reference to Rustin’s famous phrase should not be construed as agreement with either his lifestyle or many of his views.

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tiles also knew experientially the power of God through the Holy Spirit, by whose power the ministry of the gospel to the Gentiles was energized and activated.

For I will not dare to speak of any of those things which Christ has not accomplished through me, in word and deed, to make the Gentiles obedient – in mighty signs and wonders, by the power of the Spirit of God, so that from Jerusalem and round about to Illyricum I have fully preached the gospel of Christ.
(Romans 15:18-19)

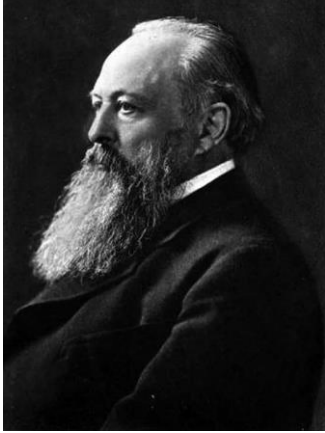
I was with you in weakness, in fear, and in much trembling. And my speech and my preaching were not with persuasive words of human wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power, that your faith should not be in the wisdom of men but in the power of God.
(I Corinthians 2:3-5)

Later in the same letter, speaking on rare occasion of the kingdom of God, Paul states, “for the kingdom of God is not in word but in power.”¹²⁹ There are many other references that could be given to show beyond doubt that the concept of ‘power’ was one with which the apostle was very familiar, and one that was very close to the heart of his understanding of the influence of God in Christ in the world. The implication is everywhere very strong that this power of Christ in the world is now mediated through His Body, the Church, as Paul enigmatically says in the closing verses of Romans, “And God shall shortly crush Satan under your feet.”¹³⁰ Thus, when the apostle speaks of *weapons of our warfare* and *the full armor of God*, and assures all believers that we are *more than conquerors*, he is using the language of power, though he also makes it perfectly clear that the power of Christ in His Church is not the same as the power of the world; it is stronger.

Christianity has long had a pacifist vein, a sizeable minority within its pale that wishes to eschew power and any such ‘power-talk’ as we have already quoted. This is in large part, perhaps, to the recognition that Lord Acton’s famous statement is wholly accurate: “Power tends to corruption, and absolute power corrupts absolutely.” In addition, this perennial minority within professing Christendom has observed the misuse of power by both secular as well as religious rulers, and has concluded that only the de-

¹²⁹ I Corinthians 4:20

¹³⁰ Romans 16:20



John Dalberg-Acton (1834-1902)

of professing Christianity is largely allied with the ‘powers’ to which the progressives are attempting to speak truth.

But power structures cannot be avoided in any human setting since ‘power’ is an integral and inextricable part of all culture. Hunter notes in his *To Change the World* that “Power saturates all of social reality and unless a person lives in complete and utter isolation from others and the things they provide, it is impossible to remove oneself from the complex dynamics of power and what power provides.”¹³¹ The Christian presence

in the world has had an uneasy and unsteady relationship with power, both in opposition to and in possession of it. Much has been written, for example, of the ‘Constantinian Settlement,’ by which the Christian Church was made not only legal by the Emperor Constantine in the 4th Century, but given great political power under his patronage. The Protestant Reformation united the political and religious ‘powers’ of Germany and Northern Europe against the



William Laud (1573-1645)

political and religious powers of Roman Catholicism and the Holy Roman Empire, ultimately resulting in the Thirty Years War, though the powers were not so easily delineated even in that war. Non-conformists suffered greatly at the Star Chamber trials conducted by Archbishop William Laud, acting as ‘chief inquisitor’ for King Charles I of England. But it is also evident that his victims were persecuted as much for their politi-

¹³¹ Hunter; 178.

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cal opposition to the king's policies as for their religion, though the two typically went hand-in-hand. Modern exponents of theonomy in the United States would do well to study these and many more periods in history in which the 'church' exercised power by persecuting the church.

Hunter maintains, along with countless sociologists and philosophers throughout history, that power is integral to all human relationships, and not always in a bad way. That power itself cannot be inherently bad is shown by the attribute of divine *omnipotence* – 'all power.' Power is occasionally exercised for good in the defeat of a cruel and inhuman regime such as Hitler's Nazi Germany or, less violently, the fall of the Soviet Union under the economic onslaught of the Western democracies. To be sure, the motives and causalities involved in each of these historical events – as well as all others – are horribly simplified by these brief statements, but the point is not all exercises of power are evil, at least not when compared with that which the power is exercised against. The overarching point, however, is that power subsists in all human society and in all human relationships. "Power, in short, is inherently relational, interactive, dynamically shared, and contentious, and it plays out at every level of society – not just among individuals but among social groups, institutions, and local and national communities."¹³²

There are two main sources of power from a metaphysical viewpoint. The *powers and principalities* discussed in our last lesson form a very real, though invisible, well-spring of power operating 'behind the scenes,' as it were, in this world and age. But power also arises from within the human community itself. Created in the image of God, Man was charged with "*subduing the earth*" and exercising dominion over it. To the chagrin of modern environmentalists, this meant an exercise of power by Man over Nature, though prior to the Fall (and in the New Earth) it can be biblically argued that the exercise of that power was to be totally benevolent. "To be made in the image of God and to be charged with the task of working in and cultivating, preserving, and protecting the creation, is to possess power. The creation mandate, then, is a mandate to

¹³² *Idem.*

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use that power in the world in ways that reflect God’s intentions.”¹³³ But even the most cursory review of both the history of mankind and of the Church (and we could add the history of Israel) will show that this power has very rarely been used with even the slightest nod to God’s intentions, and most often used only for the aggrandizement of the human being, institution, or empire wielding it.

Does the Church have power? Not earthly or institutional power, but ‘real’ power? Or perhaps the question should be, *Should* the Church have power? In the West, the exercise of power by the professing Church – particularly, but not exclusively, Protestant churches – has been predominantly political in nature and scope. This has long been characteristic of religion in the United States, a fact that de Tocqueville recog-



Samuel Johnson (1709-84)

nized and mentioned frequently in his *Democracy in America*. The intensity of politicized Christianity has waxed and waned from generation to generation but has been heightened in the past fifty years both on the ‘right’ and the ‘left’ of professing Christianity. Hunter comments, “the reality is that politics is the tactic of choice for many Christians as they think about changing the world...It is not an exaggeration to say that *the dominant public witness of the Christian churches in America since the early 1980s has been a political witness.*”¹³⁴ But Hunter quotes Samuel Johnson, the 18th Century British poet and moralist, as a corrective: “How small of all that human hearts endure, that part which laws or Kings either cause or cure.”¹³⁵

But another question may reasonably be asked in regard to the political emphasis of modern Western evangelicalism: Is the State still the supreme power? Do we still live in the Age of Empire in which the political process is the circulatory system of society, or is our age different? If our time is different, and there are many voices saying that it is indeed so, then even the common modern practice of employing political pressure on

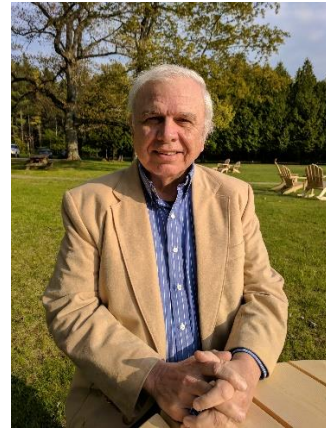
¹³³ *Ibid.*; 183.

¹³⁴ *Ibid.*; 12. Italics original.

¹³⁵ *Idem.*

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behalf of Christianity may be out of date as well as out of accord with Scripture. Over the past 150 years or so, there has been an inexorable rise in the power of industrial and financial corporations, to the point that it is questionable whether the ‘nation-state’ is really the repository of power in the 21st Century. Such a change ought not surprise us if we remember that the modern nation-state is itself a product of the High Middle Ages, replacing in its time the supremacy of the Church, which had itself replaced the Roman Empire as the power base of Western Europe. In his article titled “Cathedrals of Power: Engaging the Powers in



Clinton Stockwell (b. 1949)

Urban North America,” Clinton Stockwell notes what many others have recognized, “In contemporary global society, power is wielded mostly by big business, notably global corporations. The modern corporation has superseded not only cathedrals of ecclesiastical traditions, but even the authority and power of nations and states. The modern corporation, because of its global reach, is able to operate with minimal interference from the state. In short, the modern corporation has redefined the whole question of power in modern society.”¹³⁶

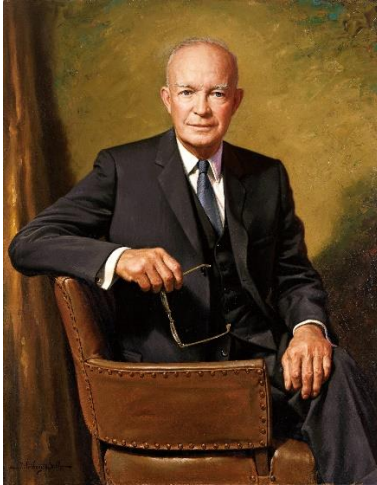
This rise of the modern corporation has been occurring slowly over the past century, beginning with the monopolistic practices of the ‘Robber Barons’ (aka ‘Captains of Industry’ to themselves and their supporters) of the late 19th Century. An indication of the power of this otherwise disparate group of hyper-wealthy individuals was the role played by the financier J. P. Morgan in averting a serious financial crisis in the United States in 1907. A similar attempt was made by current ‘baron,’ Warren Buffett, to ward off the economic downturn of the 2007/08 ‘Great Recession.’ Buffett’s attempt failed, but only because both the national and global economies have grown in scale to dwarf the wealth of a Buffett in 2007 compared to a Morgan in 1907. The point being, that the concentration of wealth over the past 150 years into the hands of a few individuals who

¹³⁶ Clinton Stockwell, “Cathedrals of Power: Engaging the Powers in Urban North America.” In *Confident Witness – Changing World*, Craig Van Gelder, ed. (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company; 1999); 81.

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often stand at the head of a few multinational corporations, is a power shift that largely passes by any public notice. The 21st Century West has yet to recognize the transfer of raw power from the political to the economic sphere.

This development was stimulated in the middle of the 20th Century by the Cold



Dwight D. Eisenhower (1890-1969)

War, during which the recent alliance between industry and military – necessary for the Allies to prevail over the Axis powers in the Second World War – became an established fact of modern American economics. This ‘Military-Industrial Complex’ was a new reality accepted as necessary by President Dwight Eisenhower, but with grave misgivings. In his Farewell Address in 1961, known historically as his ‘Military-Industrial Complex’ speech, Eisenhower warned of

the implications of this development to the political processes of the American republic. Looking back from the vantage point of sixty years, one can sense the prophetic element in Eisenhower’s speech, and almost feel the inevitable transfer of real power from the State to the Industrial Complex.

This conjunction of an immense military establishment and a large arms industry is new in the American experience. The total influence-economic, political, even spiritual-is felt in every city, every state house, every office of the Federal government. We recognize the imperative need for this development. Yet we must not fail to comprehend its grave implications. Our toil, resources and livelihood are all involved; so is the very structure of our society. In the councils of government, we must guard against the acquisition of unwarranted influence, whether sought or unsought, by the military-industrial complex. The potential for the disastrous rise of misplaced power exists and will persist. We must never let the weight of this combination endanger our liberties or democratic processes. We should take nothing for granted. Only an alert and knowledgeable citizenry can compel the proper meshing of the huge industrial and military machinery of defense with our peaceful methods and goals, so that security and liberty may prosper together.¹³⁷

¹³⁷ [President Dwight D. Eisenhower's Farewell Address \(1961\) | National Archives](#). Accessed 15 August 2023.

One need only consider the many times politicians have invoked ‘National Security’ as justification of enormous spending bills, the beneficiaries of which have typically been corporations, not least of which the ‘defense industry,’ which was itself non-existent prior to World War II. The influence, therefore, of the overall development of economic mega-corporations has shifted the basis of power in our society to the point that a viable political career all but necessitates corporate sponsorship and corporate lobbyists are among the highest paid and most powerful operatives in our political process. Western society, especially in the United States, has become an ‘acquisitive’ society, a phrase originally used by the British economist and writer, R. H. Tawney in 1920. Tawney outlines in his work how the Western capitalistic economies went from providing what people needed to determining what people needed (for them) through advertising campaigns. Whether his analysis is correct is not the point here, rather that modern consumerism is a reality, and that such consumerism is both a product of and an ongoing stimulus for increasing accumulation of power within the economic sphere. In other words, corporations.

One way this power can be measured is to investigate the ways in which public ‘opinion’ is directed and molded. Is it by politicians, or by corporations? Hunter speaks of the influence of ‘soft’ power, as opposed to the ‘hard’ power of physical coercion: “The power that inheres in culture is the capacity to define what is real in all the ways that reality presses against us. What is truth? What is knowledge and legitimate science? What are the goods worth having in life and the ideals worth sacrificing for?”¹³⁸ Stockwell adds, “In contemporary times, political and economic power have coalesced into the modern corporation. A ‘metastate’ has emerged in which the intersection of the largest transnational corporations and the international political directories of many nations constitute a new governing class.”¹³⁹ Modern Western lives are more influenced by corporations that they realize or, perhaps, are willing to admit.

¹³⁸ Hunter; 178.

¹³⁹ Van Gelder; 87.

Lest all of this sound like just one more conspiracy theory about a ‘world order’ seeking to control everyone’s life, we need to remember that in whatever form it may take in the contemporary setting, these forces are the powers of ‘*the prince of the power of the air,*’ and ‘*the god of this world.*’ As such, their ‘form’ is passing away, and this discussion is merely a recognition that the forms of worldly power do shift as the sand on the beach. Recognizing the shifting sands of worldly power will help the Church ‘understand the times’ and hopefully also help her to ‘know what is to be done’ as did the sons of Issachar. At the very least, when it comes time to discuss the Church’s role in the political sphere, it is beneficial to realize that the politician no longer wields the power he once did; many an anonymous CEO of a multinational corporation is far more powerful. Furthermore, recognizing the shift in power base from the political to the economic sphere ought to serve as a cautionary tale for modern evangelicals who tend to view unfettered economic growth – meaning the growth of the mega-corporations that most benefit from consumerism – as an unmitigated good, even an inalienable right. Liberal Catholic scholar Mary Doak notes in her article, “Power, Protest, and Perichoresis,” that “it might be worth noting that current processes of globalization involve a system of power analogous to the imperialism that Christianity has too often embraced in the past: the world is being united in an economic system that is directed by, and for the benefit of, a very small group of human beings.”¹⁴⁰

Doak, while recognizing the shift in power from the political to the economic sphere, fails as so many modern liberal scholars do, in advocating a Christian use of ‘power’ to contravene the worldly powers of the age. There is no mention in her article of the defeat of the *powers and principalities* by Jesus Christ in His death and resurrection, only another empty bromide about how a loving, Christian community can ‘resist’ the new corporate imperialism as it once did (in her revision of Christian history) the Constantinian imperialism. Yet Doak speaks better than she knows when she writes, “Christianity, with its concept of the person fulfilled in community, has the resources to con-

¹⁴⁰ Doak, Mary, “Power, Protest, and Perichoresis: On Being Church in a Troubled World” in *Christianity, Democracy, and the Shadow of Constantine*; George E. Demacopoulos & Aristotle Papanikolaou; eds. (New York: Fordham University Press; 2016); 79.

tribute to movements in opposition to imperialist globalization and social atomization.”¹⁴¹ What Doak fatally misapprehends is that the resources the Church has to participate in this ‘combat’ are the victory of Christ over the powers through the Cross, and the indwelling power of the Holy Spirit in believers and in the Church.

Whether political, imperial, or corporate, all earthly powers are merely manifestations of the *powers and principalities* that lay behind them. They are real, to be sure, but they are not self-generating. They are, to Paul, the *forms* or ‘schema,’ of this world which lie under the *god of this age*, Satan, and are *passing away*.¹⁴² As such, worldly powers – whatever their contemporary form – are entirely subject to the lordship of Jesus Christ, they fall under that authority of which Jesus speaks in Matthew 28:18, “*All authority has been given to Me in heaven and earth...*” The reason these *powers* are so daunting is their visibility, and the invisibility of the kingdom of Jesus Christ and His well-earned and irrevocable dominion over them. This is, of course, where the eyes of faith can see clearly what the Holy Spirit has revealed in Scripture, and can (and must) recognize the fallacy of all worldly power structures, whether religious, political, or economic. Reality to the believer is the New Creation in Jesus; the world systems that seem so real (and, in a manner of speaking, *are* real) are living on borrowed time. Hunter writes,

Through his suffering, death, and resurrection, Christ laid bare the illusions on which worldly power was based. The most basic of these illusions was that the distorted realities of this world are ultimate realities and the powers by which they are established and legitimated are there by right and cannot and should not be challenged. Another way to put this is that the principalities and powers posit an ontology of necessity – that reality is what it is and it cannot be changed.¹⁴³

But Paul’s message throughout is that these worldly power structures have been defeated and taken under the sovereignty of the risen God-Man, Jesus Christ. Again, perhaps the most poignant passage in this regard is in Colossians 2:15, “*Having disarmed principalities and powers, He made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them in*

¹⁴¹ *Ibid.*; 80.

¹⁴² II Corinthians 4:4

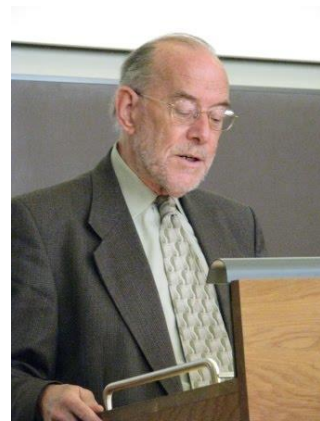
¹⁴³ Hunter; 188.

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it." The 'it' by which Christ disarmed the principalities and powers is not syntactically clear in the Greek, but most commentators take it as reference to the cross, which is the emphasis of the previous verse. This makes the best sense in light of other passages in Paul that speak of Christ's death as a triumph over the 'rulers of this age,' a triumph so complete that had they known what was going to happen, the "would not have crucified the Lord of glory."¹⁴⁴

Paul is under no doubt. It is through the cross, always remembering that it is the cross of the one who was then raised; without the resurrection, the cross would simply be a defeat, and the powers of the world would still be in charge. The cross is the victory through which the powers of the old age are brought low, enabling the new age to be ushered in at last...As a result, the 'rulers of the present age' are now 'being done away with.'¹⁴⁵

The terminology of Colossians 2:15 would have been both recognizable and vivid to the apostle's original readers: it is the language of the Roman military 'triumph' in Rome. Thus, James Dunn writes, "The final image is that of the public triumph, in which the defeated foes are led captive in the train of the triumphant general. The transformation of values, from the cross as the most shameful of deaths, to the cross as a chariot leading the defeated powers in chains behind it, is about as audacious as one could imagine. For such a metaphor to be coined, the sense of release from oppressive powers now enjoyed by newly converted Christians must have been almost palpable."¹⁴⁶ Sadly, the Church has lost its awe in the victory of God over the powers of darkness through the cross of Jesus Christ.



James D. G. Dunn (1939-2020)

Because of this lost vision, modern believers are convinced both by their pastors and by the ubiquitous talking heads – both conservative and liberal – that our battle is actually against flesh and blood; that Paul had it wrong, or at least that Paul's perspec-

¹⁴⁴ I Corinthians 2:8

¹⁴⁵ Wright, N. T. *Paul and the Faithfulness of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press; 2013); 1068.

¹⁴⁶ Dunn, *Theology of Paul*; 231.

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tive was too idealistic and impractical. We must vote, we must protest, we must act, for, as we are told all too often, ‘The only thing necessary for evil to triumph is for good people to do nothing.’ We must constantly be reminded of what Jesus’ own disciples missed: that Jesus did not come to battle the earthly powers that were oppressing Israel, but to conquer the real enemy not only of Israel but of the Gentiles, and the whole of Creation, too. “He renounced the battle that his contemporaries expected a Messiah to fight, and that several would-be Messiahs in that century were all too eager to fight. He faced, instead, what he seems to have conceived as the battle against the forces of darkness, standing behind the visible forces (both Roman and Jewish) ranged against him.”¹⁴⁷ Perhaps it is past time for the Church to follow the mirror image of the old adage: ‘Don’t just do something; sit there!’ Sit there and read Paul, and consider that the New Creation worldview that he teaches throughout his letters is the true reality, the form that is not passing away. Otherwise we are frankly at a loss as to what “*all authority in heaven and one earth*” means.

What it does mean is *power*; real, divine, omnipotent power. Paul introduces his



Thomas Schreiner (b. 1954)

letter to the Romans with the statement about Jesus that He was “*declared to be the Son of God with power according to the Spirit of holiness, by the resurrection from the dead.*”¹⁴⁸ Thomas Schreiner writes, “At his resurrection...he was installed as God’s Son with power. The new age had arrived in his resurrection from the dead and his enthronement as the messianic king.”¹⁴⁹ So many

references to this exaltation can be found in Paul’s letters, such as Colossians 2:9-10, in the same context as the military triumph noted above, “*For in Him dwells all the fullness of the Godhead bodily; and you are complete in Him, who is the head of all principality and power.*” Also the first chapter of Ephesians where, after speaking of Christ being “*seated at His right hand in the heavenly places, far above all principality and power and might and do-*

¹⁴⁷ Wright, N. T. *Jesus and the Victory of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press; 1996); 605.

¹⁴⁸ Romans 1:4

¹⁴⁹ Schreiner, Thomas *Paul, Apostle of God’s Glory in Christ* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press; 2001); 165.

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minion, and every name that is named, not only in this age but also in that which is to come,” Paul ties this into the mission and purpose of the Church, *“And He put all things under His feet, and gave Him to be head over all things to the church, which is His body, the fullness of Him who fills all in all.”*¹⁵⁰ Again Schreiner, *“The resurrection of Jesus in the midst of the present evil age has introduced a surprising wrinkle in the whole system. While the present evil age continues (Gal. 1:4), the age to come has penetrated the old age of evil and suffering. The resurrection of Jesus assures believers that the victory over the old world has been won, for Jesus has conquered death.”*¹⁵¹

Perhaps the most consistent conception regarding human power has been its associated oppression, as Hunter notes, *“The natural disposition of all human power is to its abuse.”*¹⁵² This the common lot of the vast majority of the human race throughout time, as only ever the smallest minority are in possession of functional power. While it is important to recognize the form of worldly power that is dominant in any age – religious in this age, political in that, and economic in the current – what is of most importance is to realize that there is no remedy from within the *schema* of the world that is passing away. This is why Paul encourages us with his description of our armory.

For though we walk in the flesh, we do not war according to the flesh. For the weapons of our warfare are not carnal but mighty in God for pulling down strongholds, casting down arguments and every high thing that exalts itself against the knowledge of God, bringing every thought into captivity to the obedience of Christ, and being ready to punish all disobedience when your obedience is fulfilled.
(II Corinthians 10:3-6)

The Illusion of Autonomy

When Pontius Pilate attempted to intimidate Jesus by reminding Him of the powers vested in the governor by the might of the Roman Empire, Jesus’ response sent chills down Pilate’s spine, *“You could have no power at all against Me unless it had been given you from above.”*¹⁵³ Paul, referring the Corinthians’ prior life in pagan idolatry, re-

¹⁵⁰ Ephesians 1:20-23

¹⁵¹ Schreiner; 165-66.

¹⁵² Hunter; 188.

¹⁵³ John 19:11

minded them that though they followed after idols, they were, in fact, led.¹⁵⁴ These two examples illustrate a point that is critical in our understanding of power and its structure both in this world-age and in the unseen world of the *powers and principalities*. That fact is the illusion of autonomy that every human being labors under. It is, perhaps, stronger and more pervasive in our time than in others, though the Pharisees' cry of "We are Abraham's seed and have never been made slaves to anyone" is another powerful example of this delusion.¹⁵⁵ No doubt many more examples could be found in the writings of the Greek philosophers, the politicians and orators of both republican and imperial Rome, and even the poets of Victorian England. But what is most remarkable about the illusion of autonomy today is its universality, its sheer 'democracy.' Today, *everyone* is an autonomous being, free from all authority or higher value, free to make independent choices and to exercise one's will in accordance with nothing other than one's desire. Paul would say, "however, you were led."

In fact, to Paul one is either led by the *god of this age*, who has *blinded the minds of those who are perishing*, or one is led by the Holy Spirit and is thus freed from the law of sin and death. It is perhaps one of the most effective methods of the demonic influence to convince a man that he is autonomous, that he is fully independent in thought, that is truly *the master of his fate, the captain of his soul*. James Hunter defines this attitude as nihilism, "I define nihilism as autonomous desire and unfettered will legitimated by the ideology and practice of choice."¹⁵⁶ Hunter wrote those words in 2010; how sadly prescient they have turned out to be in just thirteen years, as people are now told that even their gender is a matter not of biology, but of choice. Hunter goes on in a very significant passage of his excellent book,

The problem, then, is not with the freedom of will as such but rather its autonomy from any higher value. The power of will first becomes nihilistic at the point at which it becomes absolute; when it submits to no authority higher than itself; that is, when impulse and desire become their own moral gauge and when it is guided by no other ends than

¹⁵⁴ I Corinthians 12:2

¹⁵⁵ John 8:33

¹⁵⁶ Hunter; 211.

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its own exercise...In America, nihilism of this kind tends to foster a culture of banality that is manifested as self-indulgence, acquisition for its own sake, and empty spectacle that make so much of popular culture and consumer culture trivial.¹⁵⁷

It is hard to deny that this is a very accurate description of our current society, *when impulse and desire become their own moral gauge and when it is guided by no other ends than its own exercise*. Sadly, this attitude of autonomy has become pervasive even within evangelical churches. ‘Authority’ in the ecclesiastical setting has been largely discredited by abuses in both Catholic and Protestant communions. But the prevailing Enlightenment attitude of critical doubt, alongside the post-modern abandonment of objective reality and the rise of individual autonomy, have greatly contributed to the decline of pastoral and theological authority in the churches. Everyone is their own, individual interpreter of both Scripture and doctrine; the church congregation is little more than an aggregation of similar views, ready to split at the slightest disagreement. Modern evangelicals have “proceeded to seek assurance of faith not in terms of the objective truthfulness of the biblical teaching but in terms of the efficacy of its subjective experience.”¹⁵⁸

Coupled to this is a phenomenon that has been noted by many sociologists and psychologists in the modern era: the joining together within the Western mind of *individuality* with *conformity*. Individuals demand to be validated in their individuality by the acceptance of the group. We want to be ‘liked’ on Facebook, where there is no option to ‘not like.’ We want to determine the lifestyle we wish to live without reference to a higher standard, and then to demand that this lifestyle be affirmed both legally and socially by our community and country. David Wells summarizes his analysis of the modern, Western social situation:

Brief though this sketch has been, it has pointed to two enduring characteristics of the workings of democracy, at least in America: (1) the emphasis on private decision, on making up one’s own mind for oneself and, in doing so, taking one’s destiny into one’s own hands; and (2) the considerable importance of the public in which one’s views find

¹⁵⁷ *Idem.*

¹⁵⁸ Wells; *No Place for Truth*; 172.

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their validation. It is between these two poles of individualism and conformity, rooted as they are in freedom and equality, that Americans have lived out their lives.¹⁵⁹

Two phenomenon may be gleaned from this study on modern culture and ‘power.’ On the one hand, the seat of power in the early 21st Century has made an inexorable shift, a shift begun over a century ago, from *political* to *economic* power. This is not to say that the political powers have been entirely neutered and have no force; they do and will continue to have ‘real’ power. It is to say, however, that the levers of power are controlled more by economic forces than by political ones, and that on both sides of the congressional aisle. Thus, in attempting to *understand our times* as the sons of Issachar did, we must see that this shift in power has not only taken place but fits the historical pattern of such shifts throughout the ages. It should not come as a surprise.

What is more surprising, and in a way much more troubling, is the second characteristics of our age: the illusion of power within the mind of the individual. Embracing freedom without objective authority (that is, authority other than one’s own desire or will), Western society in its individual manifestation has jettisoned all connection with social norms, established ‘truths,’ and, in the church, even biblical doctrine. But man was never meant to be anything but a social creature, so now autonomous individuals demand social validation for their autonomous life choices, including validation from the Church. It is into this type of world that the Church of the 21st Century must reestablish its biblical moorings if it is ever to influence and impact the culture around it. It is in this environment that the Church must consider what it means to be what James Hunter calls, a *Faithful Presence*.

¹⁵⁹ Wells; 203.

Lesson 7 – What is Truth?

Text: Romans 1:18-32; I Corinthians 13:4-7; Ephesians 4:20-24; I Timothy 3:14-16

*“Thus, in the contemporary world we have the capacity to question everything
but little ability to affirm anything
beyond our own personal whims and possessive interests.”
(James Davison Hunter)*

The 2016 Oxford Dictionaries ‘Word of the Year’ was *post-truth*. Oxford lists the term as “an adjective defined as ‘relating to or denoting circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief’”¹⁶⁰ *Post-truth* beat out such notable 2016 competitors as *Brexit*, *adulthood*, *alt-right*, and *woke*. In its description of the winning word, Oxford mentions its first usage in 1992 but explains the delay in the prestigious award as a spike in use in 2016 due to the twin political phenomena of Brexit and the Donald Trump presidential candidacy. The prefixed term fits along with a series of *post-* words that have become popular in the 20th and 21st Centuries, such as *post-modern*, *post-Christian*, and *post-national*. Oxford mentions an associated word coined by comedian Stephen Colbert in 2005: *truthiness*, defined as ‘the quality of seeming or being felt to be true, even if not necessarily true.’¹⁶¹

The concept of truth is a major component of philosophical study throughout the history of mankind, not least in Christian theology and apologetics. Pilate’s question to Jesus, “*What is truth?*” was not an apathetic shrug-off to Jesus’ claim, “*You say rightly that I am a king. For this cause I was born, and for this cause I have come into the world, that I should bear witness to the truth. Everyone who is of the truth hears My voice.*”¹⁶² The Roman governor’s retort was probably a manifestation of a prevailing Aristotelian or Stoic philosophy, in which the ability to ‘know’ truth is essentially denied beyond the criteria of cognitive perception. “The Stoics propose that we should accept only cognitive impressions, and accordingly we should only form beliefs based on a subset of true perceptual impressions.”¹⁶³ This concept was later picked up by Kant, as we

¹⁶⁰ [Oxford Word of the Year 2016 | Oxford Languages \(oup.com\)](#). Accessed 22August2023.

¹⁶¹ *Idem*.

¹⁶² John 18:37

¹⁶³ [Ancient Skepticism \(Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy\)](#). Accessed 22August2023.

have seen, and became the forerunner of the post-modernist denial of objective truth so dominant in today's Western world. Truth is thus a fluid, changeable substance rather than a single, objective reality; how can Jesus witness to that?

While truth has been a major topic of philosophical debate for millennia, it has never occupied a dominant position in human society at large, a fact that philosophers



Yuval Noah Harari (b. 1976)

of every age have lamented. Yuval Noah Harari, an Israeli historian, comments that “homo sapiens has always preferred power over truth and have invested more time and effort in ruling the world than in trying to understand it.”¹⁶⁴ Certainly the power struggle between Pilate as the representative of Roman might, and the Sanhedrin as the representative of the subject Jewish people, was more important in Pilate's mind than what this Jewish rabbi had to

say about ‘truth.’ Times have not changed, and the events associated with Brexit and the 2016 Trump campaign were sufficient to make *post-truth* Oxford's word of the year.

Let us reconsider Oxford's definition of the term, “a term relating to or denoting circumstances in which **objective facts** are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief.” Part of the problem lies in the phrase ‘objective facts.’ Objective, meaning in usual parlance ‘undeniable,’ is often quite deniable, or at least debatable. ‘Climate Change’ and ‘Evolution’ are touted by ‘Science’ as ‘objective facts.’ But both terms contain a vast baggage of inuendo that many, especially Christians, refuse to accede to as ‘objective fact.’ The theory of Evolution led directly to the ‘science’ of Eugenics and to racial cleansing, culminating in, but by no means exhausted by, the Holocaust perpetrated by Nazi Germany. The ‘science’ of climate change is also not universally agreed upon, nor by any means the causes of a global warming trend, if indeed that is what is happening. But those who hold to divine creation and against manmade climate change are labeled as ‘deniers,’ or worse. Sadly, this

¹⁶⁴ Quoted by Yael Brahm, “Philosophy of Post-Truth” *Institute for National Security Studies* (2020); [Philosophy-of-Post-Truth.pdf \(inss.org.il\)](https://www.inss.org.il/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/Philosophy-of-Post-Truth.pdf); 3.

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works in the opposite direction as well, as opinions are viewed as ‘objective facts’ by right-wing conservatives no less than by left-wing liberals and progressives. The famous 20th Century philosopher, Hannah Arendt, held that “the greatest antagonist of factual truth is an opinion, rather than a lie, particularly in light of the current predilection of blurring between fact and opinion.”¹⁶⁵ Arendt points to the tendency of modern Westerners to speak of their own statements of fact as ‘opinions,’ but to do so, using the ever-growing influence of mass media, in such a way as to indicate the subliminal view that they hold it to be ‘objective fact’ nonetheless. This phenomenon reached its apex with the ‘talking heads’



Hannah Arendt (1906-75)

of both liberal and conservative ‘talk radio’ and has degenerated into Instagram and Twitter posts ‘followed’ by tens of thousands or more. There was a time when Hollywood celebrities stayed out of the political and scientific realms of public discourse (unless dragged into it during the McCarthy Red Scare of the 1950s); but now every celebrity is an expert on every topic merely by virtue of being a celebrity. ‘Facts’ are still a form of currency in modern debate, but they are used – or at least that which is purported to be ‘fact’ – more as talking points around which a speaker weaves his or her opinion, than as tangible realities to be considered and debated. Lee McIntyre, author of the 2018 book titled *Post-Truth*, “argues that the innovation in the post-truth phenomenon is not a denial of the existence of truth and facts, but rather is the subjugation of facts to personal preconceptions and a subjective perspective.”¹⁶⁶

Although the subjugation of facts to opinions does characterize much of Western political and social discourse, the pursuit of ‘truth’ is still a conscious effort among modern philosophers as it was among ancient. Yael Brahm, an Israeli editor and national security analyst, outlines four major modern theories regarding ‘truth’ in her article “Philosophy of Post-Truth,” a paper written for the Institute for National Security

¹⁶⁵ In Brahm, “Philosophy of Post-Truth”; 3.

¹⁶⁶ *Ibid.*; 4.

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Studies in support of the Israeli government's intelligence organization. Her outline is fairly representative of other summaries of modern views on 'truth,' and will be helpful in setting the backdrop to a biblical and Pauline analysis of 'truth' later in this lesson.

The Correspondence Theory of Truth

This theory of truth "maintains that the key to truth is a relation between a proposition and the world – a proposition is true if and only if it corresponds to a fact in the world."¹⁶⁷ Philosophers who hold the correspondence theory of truth are metaphysical 'realists,' believing there to be connection between what man perceives and conceives on the one hand, and objective reality in the universe on the other. The strength of this theory is just that: its stated connection between 'truth' and 'reality.' But, as Brahm's notes in her article, this is also the theory's weakness, for it is not always possible to develop the correspondence between a truth proposition and the reality in the world. An example from Christian theology would be the resurrection of Jesus Christ, itself a truth proposition that stands against the 'reality' that dead people do not rise from the grave. It is too common to simply pass such propositions as the resurrection of Jesus as 'articles of faith,' when the Christian witness, and indeed the Christian gospel, is predicated on the *factual, historical* event of Jesus' resurrection.

The Coherence Theory of Truth

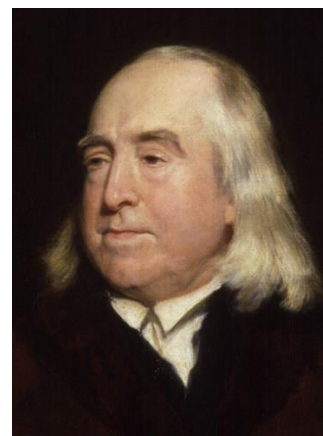
This theory is perhaps more a subject of Logic than of Philosophy, as it posits that 'truth' exists only as part of a coherent system of propositions. This view adheres to the metaphysical view of 'idealism,' in which mental perceptions are nothing more than 'ideas' that have no connection with actual reality. Brahm's writes, "Most of the advocates of coherence theory are proponents of metaphysical idealism, whereby facts and reality, first and foremost, abstract ideas that exist in human consciousness...Idealism does not necessarily deny the very existence of reality and facts, but rather, rejects the

¹⁶⁷ *Ibid.*; 6.

idea that they are independent of human perception.”¹⁶⁸ What is important in the coherence theory is that a system of propositions holds together logically, though that system may in itself be false. Brahms, writing as an analyst for Israeli intelligence, uses the example of the 2015 Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action by which Iran would halt its development of nuclear weapons/energy in return for the lifting of economic sanctions then in place against the Middle Eastern country. The split phrase ‘weapons/energy’ indicates the dichotomy of ‘truth’ scenarios that were propagated after the treaty was signed. Those who supported the treaty held that it was an effective halt on Iranian development of nuclear technology because the Iranian government was placing the stability of the nation ahead of its possession of nuclear power that could be transferred into nuclear weaponry. Skeptics maintained that it was nothing short of Iranian duplicity: a ploy to get the Western powers to lift stifling sanctions on the Iranian economy while the Iranian government would continue to covertly develop its nuclear capacities. The ‘coherence’ of the same facts led to diametrically-opposed conclusions, though within each ‘truth’ system the facts stood together logically. Thus, a logical system of propositions and conclusions can be held to be ‘true’ simply because of the logical coherence of the system.

The Pragmatic Theory of Truth

This theory is perhaps the most characteristic of the modern Western world at least since the 18th Century. Brahms notes that according to the pragmatic theory “the key to truth is utility – the value of the truth in a proposition is determined according to its practical outcomes and the utility that it provides.”¹⁶⁹ This does not constitute an imaginative ‘creation’ of truths that ‘work’ – that phenomenon is, in fact, a denial of ‘truth’ in any sense of the word and is en-



Jeremy Bentham (1748-1832)

¹⁶⁸ *Ibid.*; 6-7.

¹⁶⁹ *Idem.*

demic of the politician's alleged 'truth.' Rather, pragmatism maintains that facts are to be sorted, arranged, even cohered in order of their usefulness to a preconceived purpose. This utilitarian philosophy is the brainchild of Jeremy Bentham, the 18th and early 19th Century English philosopher who famously stated that "it is the greatest happiness of the greatest number that is the measure of right and wrong."¹⁷⁰

The Pluralistic Approach to Truth

Brahms maintains that this fourth theory is the truly modern one, the other representing 'neo-classical' thought on the subject. It is really just an evolution of the pragmatic theory, as "there is no key to the truth – truth is a function that may be manifested in several ways. For every manifestation of truth there is a different definition of the criteria of truth, and different criteria of truth may be adopted for different topics of discourse."¹⁷¹ It should be evident from this definition of the pluralistic approach – indeed, from the title of the approach itself; *pluralistic* – that it is not really a theory of truth at all, which is perhaps why Brahms calls it an 'approach.' But it is also not an approach to 'truth' in any meaningful sense of the word. It is perhaps better to say that the 'approach' is moving *away* from truth and is nothing less than a complete evasion of truth. However, it is very descriptive of much 'truth' discussions in the current public forum, as it touches upon one of the most important characteristics of 'truth' in any philosophical system: the meaning of words. To this we will return in a little while.

First it is necessary to analyze these theories or approaches to truth and try to determine if any of them, or any combination of them, reflects a biblical understanding of truth. Reviewing the theories will also show a progression among them, a progression that has been accelerated by the Enlightenment. Thus, *prima facie*, the 'correspondence' theory is most attractive for orthodox believers as it posits a direct relationship between truth statements and reality. The challenge, however, is in establishing the correct correspondence, especially with truth propositions which are not susceptible to direct cor-

¹⁷⁰Bentham, Jeremy. *A Comment on the Commentaries and a Fragment on Government*, edited by J. H. Burns and H. L. A. Hart (London: The Athlone Press; 1977); 393.

¹⁷¹ Brahms; 7.

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roboration. The truth propositions of the Christian faith are just such statements, as are those of the cosmological theories of Creation and Evolution. The effect of the Enlightenment and of Post-modernism, then, has been to sever the correspondence between truth propositions and reality, relegating unsubstantiated propositions to the rank of opinion or of articles of faith, both widely recognized today as ‘less than’ truth.

The resulting emphasis on logical (some would say ‘scientific’) syllogism gave rise and prominence to the ‘coherence’ theory of truth, which focuses on how a system of truth propositions ‘holds together’ logically rather than the actual truth content of the system. This subjectivizes truth and results in ‘competing’ truths, especially in pluralistic cultures such as Western Europe and the United States. Truth systems become ‘plausibility structures’ and compete for dominance within the public forum. Newbigin describes the resultant culture: “Pluralism is conceived to be a proper characteristic of the secular society, a society in which there is no officially approved pattern of belief or conduct. It is therefore also conceived to be a free society, a society not controlled by accepted dogma but characterized rather by the critical spirit which is ready to subject all dogma to critical (and even sceptical [*sic*]) examination.”¹⁷² The more diverse the society, however, the less ‘functional’ is the coherence theory of truth – there is less and less common ground on which to base the accepted ‘truth structures,’ leading to greater debate and distrust within the pluralist society itself. In the past – granting that individual societies were far more homogeneous to begin with – such growing division within a society would be solved by authority and force. Modern Western democracies do not operate in that manner.

Thus ‘pragmatism’ becomes an intermediate ground between coherence and an openly pluralistic approach to truth, the latter being the dominant pattern of the Western world in the 21st Century. The pragmatic theory of truth seemed to fit well within the epistemological marriage between Enlightenment philosophy and scientific discovery, operating jointly with their close relative (offspring?), the Industrial Revolution. The banishment of God from the public forum, through the deistic denial of imma-

¹⁷² Newbigin, Lesslie. *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*; 1.

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nence, left the field of truth to the operation of human reason alone. Having no higher standard from which to critique truth claims, Western society relied more and more on the claims of Science, on the 'laws' of the natural realm. But the rise of the Industrial Revolution and the rapid advance of technology rendered Western society less philosophical and more practical, resulting in the Benthamite principle of utilitarianism. That is truth which works, became the modern creed, and 'works' became more and more associated with scientific and technical advance. The horizon of the epistemological universe shrunk to the sight lines of efficiency and productivity.

While the pragmatic theory is still the operative system of 'truth' determination in Western culture, the increasing diversity of that culture as well as a backlash against the de-humanizing impact of unfettered industrialism, has given rise to the 'pluralistic approach' to truth. Mankind is a social creature, but when that society becomes heterogeneous there are inevitable tensions and conflicts between divergent worldviews. Each segment of a pluralistic society brings with it its own 'metanarrative' of truth; rarely are these in agreement and even more rarely are they functionally compatible. To a degree, pragmatism will continue to hold such a society together: after all, every member of society has a vested interest in things 'going on.' But in the public forum the debates on 'truth,' facts,' 'values,' and 'meaning' rage on, with a consequent fragmentation of social thought. Arguably there has been no greater example of this phenomenon than the current situation in Western society. Within a given epistemological metanarrative, these terms are basically description of the same system of thought and life: truth consists of facts, and values are derived from truths, the meaning of which is generally accepted according to the governing metanarrative. In pluralistic societies, however, peace is often maintained by a separation of the terms: 'facts' are divorced from 'values,' and 'truth' becomes fluid as 'meaning' becomes more and more individualistic and personal. Newbigin comments, "It is one of the key features of our culture...that we make a sharp distinction between a world of what we call 'values' and a world of what we call

‘facts.’ In the former world we are pluralists; values are a matter of personal choice. In the latter we are not; facts are facts, whether you like them or not.”¹⁷³

This is the ‘post-truth’ world of which Yael Brahms writes in her article, in which “the most prominent characteristic of the phenomenon is the loss of the fact-based objective truth, or at least a decline in its value.”¹⁷⁴ Summarizing the viewpoints of a number of divergent 20th-Century philosophers, Brahms notes their agreement on the diminution of objective truth as a characteristic of the ‘post-truth’ era in Western culture.

Arendt points to a blurring of the differentiation between fact-based truth and opinion; Harari and McIntyre point to a preference for facts that substantiate prejudices over facts that refute them; Dennett holds that respect for truth and facts has been lost; d’Ancona emphasizes the preference for subjective interpretations and narratives over subjective facts; and Marmot speaks about the indifference to truth and factual evidence.¹⁷⁵

It is important to note here that this development of ‘post-truth’ is not limited to just the ‘liberal’ or ‘unbelieving’ segment of modern, Western culture; it is systemic of all Western thought, including much of what purports to be ‘Christian’ thought. ‘Truth’ is governed by agenda; facts are filtered through opinion; debate is reduced to antagonistic haranguing. Within this volatile environment, technology has entered to make communication more immediate, information more available, and actual, critical thought rarer than a four-leafed clover. Brahms writes, “information is what brokers reality to us today. Information consumers have no way of clarifying the truth value of most of the information disseminated through technology – via the media, the internet, and social networks – because in most cases, information consumers do not stand in direct relation to the relevant facts.”¹⁷⁶

Thus far we have not touched upon the logical correlative (and opposite) of ‘truth’ – that is, ‘falsehood’ or ‘lies.’ This is largely because, in the development of truth

¹⁷³ *Ibid.*; 7.

¹⁷⁴ Brahms; 8.

¹⁷⁵ *Idem.*

¹⁷⁶ *Ibid.*; 9.

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theories and practices in the modern, Western world, 'false' has become a meaningless word. Post-modernism, and 'post-truth,' denies the absolute validity of any truth statement or governing metanarrative, accepting instead the relative truth value of all truth structures. "It is customary to attribute to postmodernism the rejection of a single objective truth in favor of a multitude of subjective and relative truths, and the argument that there is no single true scientific theory and no single meta-narrative, but rather a multitude of theories and narratives that are created from a variety of perspectives, none of which take precedence over the other."¹⁷⁷ It is perhaps the most cogent feature of our modern Western world that epistemology has been thoroughly democratized. This is the mediation of the pragmatic theory of truth through the pluralistic approach to truth, the third and fourth of the summary theories combined in practice.

[S]cience also has no single meta-narrative and that even scientific truth depends on a subjective perspective, and basically is not a product of the objective facts alone, but rather, of the scientific enterprise as a social enterprise, which is financed and guided by political ideologies and motives. If the postmodern approach to truth is interpreted in this way, then it does not reject the facts or the factual truths per se, but rather, rejects the existence of a single, objective meta-narrative that can explain the facts.¹⁷⁸

Among the rejected metanarratives is the biblical, Christian worldview. This, Newbigin writes, "is the rock which must either become the foundation of all knowing and doing, or else the stone on which one stumbles and falls to disaster."¹⁷⁹ The gospel message with which the Church is invested and entrusted, is the only meta-narrative that is capable of uniting all others under its dominion, either by destroying their falsehood and leading them into the truth, or by discerning what vestiges of truth remain within them by comparison and subservience to the truth "*as it is in Christ Jesus.*" Newbigin continues, "This proclamation invites belief. It is not something whose truth can be demonstrated by reference to human experience in general. Rather, it is that by the acceptance of which all human experience can be rightly understood. It is the light by

¹⁷⁷ *Ibid.*; 11.

¹⁷⁸ *Ibid.*; 12.

¹⁷⁹ Newbigin, *The Gospel*; 6.

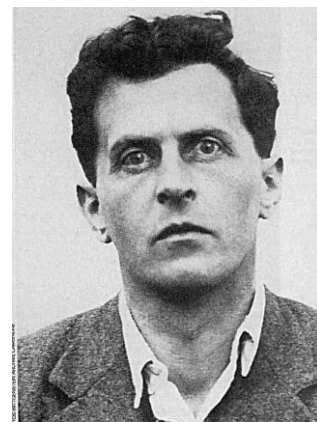
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which things are seen as they really are, and without which they are not truly seen.”¹⁸⁰ This last sentence echoes the famous saying by C. S. Lewis: “I believe in Christianity as I believe the sun has risen: not only because I see it, but because by it I see everything else.”

The Meaning of Words

At the very core of the Christian, gospel metanarrative is the presence of the Lord of glory, Jesus Christ, whom the Scriptures refer to as the Word – *Logos* – of God. The use of the Greek term *logos* is purposeful, for this concept of ‘word’ was integral to all philosophical discussions of truth in the ancient world. The correspondence between word and truth was viewed as essential; the meaning of words was inseparable from the truth they conveyed. This is by no means to say that individual words have one and only one meaning, but rather that the words that are used within a particular context bring meaning to that context as well as derive meaning from it. In other words, words have a semantic *range* that is understood and accepted in discourse. For most of human history, not least human *philosophical* history, the semantic range of words within any given language was a matter of presupposition. If a word was used in a manner logically outside its range, it was usually recognized to be a metaphor, or a pun, or some other form of figurative speech in which the word was being utilized to elicit a response, or a laugh.

The close connection began to unravel in the hands of one of the most influential 20th Century philosophers, Ludwig Wittgenstein. Wittgenstein was himself none too stable; students in his classes were constantly kept on edge by his mercurial behavior. “Wittgenstein was a difficult character. Those who knew him assumed he was either a madman or a genius. He was known for working himself up into fits of frustration, pacing about



Ludwig Wittgenstein (1889-1951)

¹⁸⁰ *Idem.*

the room decrying his own stupidity, and lambasting philosophers for their habit of tying themselves in semantic knots.”¹⁸¹ Wittgenstein’s most famous dictum is “Meaning is use.” By this the philosopher meant that the meaning of a word is determined by its usage in the logical structure, the context of the passage, or the framework of the limerick or pun. The problem with the Wittgensteinian approach to the use of words in communication is that the word being used derives its meaning from its use, and not necessarily from an intrinsic connection to reality. “The bottom line is that using a term does not necessarily imply a belief in an entity that corresponds to this term. The meaning of a word hinges on its usefulness in context, not its ideal referent outside of all possible contexts.”¹⁸²

Wittgenstein was, perhaps, struggling to develop a philosophical explanation for the ubiquitous phenomenon called ‘misunderstanding.’ Words are the vehicle of language, and the various languages were established to confuse mankind and keep him from uniting in rebellion and sin. This is, at least, the biblical perspective, and there has been nothing in the course of human communication to cast this viewpoint in doubt. Hunter writes that the issue “is not that there is a strict correspondence between words and the realities that make up human experience. After all, words notoriously fail to adequately express, describe, and explain the depths and complexities of love, beauty, knowledge, and sensation.”¹⁸³ Nonetheless, and Wittgenstein notwithstanding, words have always existed within their semantic range as markers of the reality they represent, and this has been both accepted within every language group and has served as the bedrock of communication, however imperfect. Hunter comments that “our civilization is based on the confidence or presumption that such a correspondence [*i.e.*, between words and realities] exists; that the world and our being in it are articulable.”¹⁸⁴ If this correspondence breaks down, more is lost than simply the ability to communicate.

¹⁸¹ Rayner, Tim “Meaning is Use: Wittgenstein on the Limits of Language” *Philosophy for Change*. [Meaning is use: Wittgenstein on the limits of language – Philosophy for change \(wordpress.com\)](#). Accessed 28August2023.

¹⁸² *Idem*.

¹⁸³ Hunter; 205.

¹⁸⁴ *Idem*.

One need not look far into the current discussions in the public forum to realize that the divorce between words and reality is very far advanced, if not complete. This is, of course, especially evident in the ‘gender fluid’ terminology and the havoc such linguistic perversion wreaks on the meaning of words as well as of gender itself. This has either led to, or is the result of, a complete breakdown in meaning in postmodern Western society to the point that normal conversation is no longer possible in some quarters. “And if words can mean anything, then they have no intrinsic meaning or at least no possibility of a common meaning. They only mean what we say they mean. There are no fixed points of reference. What is more, there is no authority that can be appealed to in order to definitively establish the meaning of words or to adjudicate which meaning is more truthful or better than another...Thus, in the contemporary world we have the capacity to question everything but little ability to affirm anything beyond our own personal whims and possessive interests.”¹⁸⁵

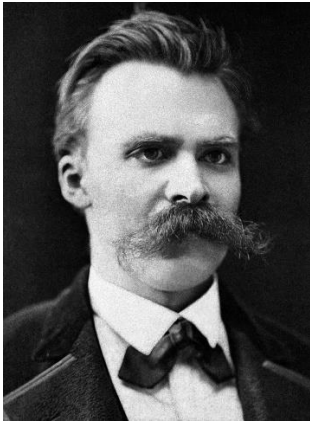
The challenge to any such society – and it is debatable whether there has ever been such a society – is that such a breakdown in the meaning of words, and the resultant destruction of meaningful dialogue within the public forum, is untenable. At some point a society must be able to understand its own discourse simply in order to function. “Apart from a few celebrity nihilists and a few disaffected graduate students, there are actually few consistent relativists or committed postmodernists for the simple reason that it is not livable.”¹⁸⁶ Yet conceptual and linguistic nihilism seems to be gaining ground in the current Western context, certainly in a manner that would have been inconceivable even fifty years ago. Many scholars attribute both the spread of intellectual nihilism and its durability to the ‘Information Explosion’ of the Internet and social media. Yael Brahm refers to participants in the culture of information as ‘consumers of information’ who, so to speak, binge shop on information well beyond their capacity to digest or meaningfully use.

¹⁸⁵ *Ibid.*; 206.

¹⁸⁶ *Ibid.*; 207.

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Added to the abundance and accessibility of information in the Internet Age is the phenomenon of ‘disruptive technology’ – the ability of technocrats and technogeeks to manipulate information and create both artificial intelligence and ‘fake news.’ Thus, not only is there too much data for information consumers to process (though they continue to binge on it), some, and perhaps much, of that information is patently and purposely *false*. This places truth even farther from each individual within postmodern, Western society than the disruption of word meaning would imply, since “the distance between the consumers of information and the facts in reality that support it is steadily increasing due to the information explosion and disruptive technology, until it is nearly



Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900)

impossible to bridge.”¹⁸⁷ All of this has produced a culture in the modern West that Hunter calls nihilistic, defining the terms as “autonomous desire and unfettered will legitimated by the ideology and practice of choice.”¹⁸⁸ Traditionally, nihilism is associated with the 19th Century German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche and is defined as “the belief that all values are baseless and that no thing can be known or communicated.”¹⁸⁹ Nietzsche considered nihilism to be the

inevitable course of history, at least in the West, “and argued that its corrosive effects would eventually destroy all moral, religious, and metaphysical convictions and precipitate the greatest crisis in human history.”¹⁹⁰ His approach to human history and philosophy was, of course, entirely atheistic and, remarkably considering his mental condition throughout his life, considered the complete destruction of human epistemology to be the only hope that mankind might at last find meaning and rebuild a perfect world. Such hopes, coupled with his ‘God is dead, and we have killed Him’ perspective, may be considered at least somewhat prophetic or prescient considering the modern, Western nihilism in the meaning of words and the pervasive practical atheism of the 21st

¹⁸⁷ Brahm; 16.

¹⁸⁸ Hunter; 211.

¹⁸⁹ Pratt, Alan “Nihilism” *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. [Nihilism | Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy \(utm.edu\)](https://www.iep.utm.edu/nihilism/). Accessed 29 August 2023.

¹⁹⁰ *Idem*.

Century. The abandonment, as Nietzsche saw it, of Christianity in the 19th Century due to the Enlightenment of the 18th Century, left an epistemological vacuum that would suck Western (European) culture into its void. His expressed hope that truth would somehow arise from the ashes seems to be little more than whistling in the graveyard.

From the vantage point of more than a century since Nietzsche died, Western postmodern culture has traveled a roller-coaster road through two devastating world wars, the rebuilding of Europe and the spectre of nuclear world destruction, to a revitalized democratic impulse with the fall of the Soviet Union, as well as the rise of neo-orthodoxy within evangelical Christianity. Yet through all of this Nietzsche's prediction of nihilism remained as one of the most accurate forecasts of thought and social behavior in the West, even among professing Christians. Thus Hunter speaks of nihilism as a result of 'dissolution,' which he defines as "the deconstruction of the most basic assumptions about reality."¹⁹¹ The expansion of personal liberty, in itself a good thing, has led to the rejection of all forms of authority over the individual, all authority other than the individual's will and the individual's choice. Thus Hunter concludes,

The problem, then, is not with the freedom of will as such but rather its autonomy from any higher value. The power of will first becomes nihilistic at the point at which it becomes absolute; when it submits to no authority higher than itself; that is, when impulse and desire become their own moral gauge and when it is guided by no other ends than its own exercise...The dynamics of dissolution are that it dissolves all reality, all meaningful authority, and all meaningful moral purposes but will. In America, nihilism of this kind tends to foster a culture of banality that is manifested as self-indulgence, acquisition for its own sake, and empty spectacle that makes so much of popular culture and consumer culture trivial.¹⁹²

The forces of pluralism and nihilism in the postmodern West explain why so much of modern debate is nonsensical to traditionalists of any religious orientation. Indeed, the foundations of thought have been so undermined that it is not even correct to use the word 'debate' to describe public discussion today. The connection between

¹⁹¹ Hunter; 205.

¹⁹² *Ibid.*; 211.

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words and their accepted meanings has been severed; the relationship between ‘truth’ and ‘reality’ almost completely abandoned; believers are left wondering if the Church even has a message for the world in which it lives. Perhaps the pillars have fallen, as Nietzsche claimed, though if this be the case no biblically oriented Christian can consider that a good thing, as he did.

Truth as it is in Christ Jesus

The picture of the world in which we live today is not encouraging, but it is encouraging to know that our world is not all that different from Paul’s. For instance, the dissolution of reason in our culture is largely the result of philosophy – human philosophy, little different than the philosophy that permeated the 1st Century Mediterranean world in which Paul preached, pastored, and wrote his epistles. He warned believers then against being seduced by empty human philosophy and his warning is indeed timeless.

Beware lest anyone cheat you through philosophy and empty deceit, according to the tradition of men, according to the basic principles of the world, and not according to Christ. For in Him dwells all the fullness of the Godhead bodily; and you are complete in Him, who is the head of all principality and power.
(Colossians 2:8-10)

We are reminded that the phrase ‘*basic principles*’ in the New King James version quoted, is the Greek word *stoicheia* investigated in an earlier lesson. Thus we are reminded that, even twenty centuries removed, Paul’s analysis of the world is as accurate now as it was then; the *stoicheia* are still with us in the 21st Century, represented today by nihilistic philosophers like Nietzsche as they were in the 1st Century by Platonistic philosophers like Plutarch. It is very important that in the process of considering the role and position of the Church in the world in our age, that we not forget the constancy of sin and human rebellion in all and every age. Unregenerate mankind is continuing to reject the truth and believe the lie, no less now than when Paul wrote his letter to the Romans,

Professing to be wise, they became fools, and changed the glory of the incorruptible God into an image made like corruptible man – and birds and four-footed animals and creeping things. There-

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fore God also gave them up to uncleanness, in the lusts of their hearts, to dishonor their bodies among themselves, who exchanged the truth of God for the lie, and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever. Amen. (Romans 1:22-25)

“Professing to be wise,” is essentially the dictionary definition of a philosopher. Where do such men (and, now, women) lead us? To “exchange the truth of God for the lie.” It is significant that Paul uses the definite article in front of ‘lie,’ – *the* lie, as if there really is only one lie, though it has taken many different forms. The result of mankind’s abandonment of the *truth of God* for *the lie* is, as Nietzsche would recognize nineteen hundred years later, *nihilism*: the dissolution and destruction of human society. It can be no other way, man is made in the image of God and departure from God can only lead to dissolution of the human mind and destruction of human society. This is true wisdom, as Paul contrasts with the wisdom of unbelieving man:

Where is the wise? Where is the scribe? Where is the disputer of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of this world? For since, in the wisdom of God, the world through wisdom did not know God, it pleased God through the foolishness of the message preached to save those who believe. For Jews request a sign, and Greeks seek after wisdom; but we preach Christ crucified, to the Jews a stumbling block and to the Greeks foolishness, but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. Because the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men. (I Corinthians 1:20-25)

The Church is in possession, through the presence of the Holy Spirit and the Scriptures, of a wisdom the world cannot know. This is the truth “*as it is in Christ Jesus,*” which is the only, real truth.¹⁹³ The bane of the Church throughout the ages has been philosophy, and the illegitimate desire of believers to be considered ‘wise’ by the world, rather than to stand secure in the true wisdom, which is the knowledge of God in Jesus Christ. Thus did the 2nd Century North African theologian Tertullian rhetorically ask, paraphrasing Paul, “What fellowship hath Athens with Jerusalem?” The Church - if it is to bear witness in any age, including the present one - must be able to see the lie in modern reason and philosophy, and to hold fast to the truth of and in Jesus Christ. This does not mean the rejection of human rationality, reason, or ‘science.’ Newbigin writes,

¹⁹³ Cp. Ephesians 4:20

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“Believing that Jesus is the way into the fullness of truth, he [*i.e.*, the believer] will be ready to open himself to all reality from whatever side it comes and to grasp all new truths in the power of the Truth which has grasped him.”¹⁹⁴ The believer is now a spiritual man and can discern all things; the unbeliever is still but a natural man and the things of the spirit are a loss to him. Paul sums this up so powerfully in I Corinthians 2 that it is worth quoting the passage at length.

However, we speak wisdom among those who are mature, yet not the wisdom of this age, nor of the rulers of this age, who are coming to nothing. But we speak the wisdom of God in a mystery, the hidden wisdom which God ordained before the ages for our glory, which none of the rulers of this age knew; for had they known, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory. But as it is written:

*Eye has not seen, nor ear heard, nor have entered into the heart of man
The things which God has prepared for those who love Him.*

But God has revealed them to us through His Spirit. For the Spirit searches all things, yes, the deep things of God. For what man knows the things of a man except the spirit of the man which is in him? Even so no one knows the things of God except the Spirit of God. Now we have received, not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit who is from God, that we might know the things that have been freely given to us by God. These things we also speak, not in words which man's wisdom teaches but which the Holy Spirit teaches, comparing spiritual things with spiritual. But the natural man does not receive the things of the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him; nor can he know them, because they are spiritually discerned. But he who is spiritual judges all things, yet he himself is rightly judged by no one. For “who has known the mind of the LORD that he may instruct Him?” But we have the mind of Christ. (I Corinthians 2:6-16)

Much is different in the postmodern world, but much is the same. The dichotomy between natural and spiritual remains, as does the wisdom of God which the possession of the Church through the presence of the Holy Spirit. Hunter expresses the ageless challenge: “a tension exists for the Christian community, a community caught in the unavoidable pull between history and revelation; between the conditions of social life in any particular epoch and the call of God on the church.”¹⁹⁵ Thus, the Church in the World.

¹⁹⁴ Newbigin, *Signs*; 76.

¹⁹⁵ Hunter; 230.

Lesson 8 – New Wine/New Wineskins
Text: Romans 13:8-14; Ephesians 5:6-14; Philippians 2:1-4

*“God is at work in the world,
but the world in its wisdom does not know God.
It has been so from the beginning, and it will always be so.”*
(Lesslie Newbigin)

With the preceding assessment of post-modernism and post-truth, it is time to revisit the ‘culture’ themes of Niebuhr’s *Christ and Culture*. It should be evident at this point that no single perspective of the five that Niebuhr outlines has either stemmed the tide of modernism into post-modernism, nor arrested the descent of evangelicalism into marginalization and irrelevancy. Isolation from, accommodation with, and transcendence over culture have failed, at least from the mundane perspective of maintaining a significant influence for Christianity in modern Western culture. But we do well to remind ourselves here that Paul’s definition of ‘success’ was not informed by Adam Smith or by Madison Avenue marketing agencies: *“it is required in stewards that one be found faithful.”*¹⁹⁶ It may be assumed that believers adopting each of the cultural perspectives, and those adopting portions of several or of all, have desired to be faithful to the gospel and to their calling as disciples of Jesus Christ. Still, it cannot be said that any one Niebuhrian perspective has gained the field, and Carson, in his *Christ & Culture Revisited*, concludes, *“In short, it appears that some, and perhaps all, of Niebuhr’s five patterns need to be trimmed in some way, by reflection on the broader realities of biblical-theological developments.”*¹⁹⁷

In reality, the failure of any one perspective to ‘work’ in the manner intended gives reason to pause and consider whether a paradigm shift is not called for here in the early decades of the 21st Century. The fundamental premise in each of Niebuhr’s patterns is that the Church has an obligation to a self-conscious relationship with the prevailing culture in which it is found in any given era and any given region. Carson’s critique of Niebuhr does not seem to call this presupposition into question, though he

¹⁹⁶ I Corinthians 4:2

¹⁹⁷ Carson, *Christ & Culture Revisited*; 60.

does make an important recognition that the Church, when true to her calling, herself constitutes a ‘culture’ in the midst of surrounding world.

Christian communities honestly seeking to live under the Word of God will inevitably generate cultures that, to say the least, will in some sense counter or confront the values of the dominant culture...Christians thus shaped by Scripture envision a church that not only counters alternative cultures but also seeks sacrificially to serve the good of others – the city, the nation, common humanity, not least the poor. Salt does not confront; it enhances.¹⁹⁸

Tacit in this modification of Niebuhrian interaction is the premise that the Church has a responsibility vis-à-vis the surrounding culture; Carson is simply suggesting a variant means of accomplishing that task. However, it is the premise itself that must be challenged. Yet, while it might seem that such a proposition is nothing more than the *Christ Against Culture* monasticism or cloisterism repackaged, the failure of that paradigm and the damage done by it to the Church herself, precludes such a conclusion. There is a conundrum here: the Church must be present in the world yet unstained by the world. Worldly culture in any age is a “*form passing away*” and is thus practically irredeemable through any activity of the Church, yet the Church always exists in the context of worldly culture. Indeed, the Church is nothing less than the redeemed children of God *from* the surrounding culture, and we can readily see from Paul’s letters that these redeemed sinners never left their ‘culture’ entirely at the church’s threshold. So it is undeniable that the Church cannot avoid culture; its very life is in the presence of culture. Yet even this does not necessarily mean that the Church has a self-conscious duty with respect to the surrounding culture – at least not in the terms outlined by Niebuhr’s five patterns.

Rodney Clapp, an Episcopalian in religious persuasion and an editor at Cascade Books, notes in his *Naming Neo-Liberalism* that the current phenomenon of cultural interaction between the Church and the surrounding world has much to do with the ‘Constantinian Settlement’ of the 4th Century. Clapp’s own solution is manifestly ac-

¹⁹⁸ *Ibid.*; 143.

commodationist with respect to such hot-button issues in modern evangelicalism as ‘same-sex’ marriages, but his analysis of the changing cultural situation, the *Sitz im Leben* of modern evangelicalism, is instructive nonetheless in that it presents a very plausible explanation as to *why* Niebuhr’s patterns are even subject to consideration. The crux of Clapp’s argument is that the relationship between Church and State – and within that the relationship of the Church to the dominant cultural context – was massively changed when Christianity was legalized by the Emperor Constantine in the early 4th Century. The ‘Constantinian Settlement,’ or ‘Constantinianism’ as Clapp refers to it, is defined in his book as “connoting a situation in which the state and the general culture support and promote Christianity.”¹⁹⁹ Another definition of the historical event states,

In 313, the Emperor Constantine granted Christianity toleration and legal status. This act ended the last persecution of Christians in the Roman Empire, which had begun under Diocletian in 303, and it was hailed as the “Peace of the Church.” The Constantinian settlement provided social and material conditions in which the religious practice of ordinary Christians could flourish, and many new converts (though not all with pure motives) flocked into the newly built churches.²⁰⁰

Constantine famously ‘converted’ to Christianity – there is significant historical debate as to whether Constantine ever actually converted – consequent to his military victory over Maxentius at the Battle of Milvian Bridge in October, 312. Prior to the battle, Constantine saw a vision in which the Chi-Ro



Chi-Ro – the first two letters of ‘Christ’

of Greek Christianity was visible in the clouds, accompanied by the words *en toutoi nika* – ‘In this conquer.’ The magnitude and import of the victory convinced Constantine that Christianity – and more importantly the Christian God – was the true religion. It is commonly believed that Constantine made Christianity the sole religion of the Roman

¹⁹⁹ Clapp, Rodney *Naming Neoliberalism* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press; 2021); 192.

²⁰⁰ Lang, Uwe Michael “After the Peace of the Church: Liturgy in a Christian Empire – A Short History of the Roman Rite of Mass, Part V. [After the Peace of the Church: Liturgy in a Christian Empire – A Short History of the Roman Rite of Mass, Part V - Adoremus](#). Accessed 03September2023.

Empire. In historical fact, Constantine only made Christianity legal and ended the sporadic bouts of persecution by which previous emperors had attempted to eradicate the pervasive and growing religion. Paganism was also permitted by law, at least until its legal abolishment several generations later by the Emperor Theodosius. Still, Constantine's actions set Christianity, and the Church, on a vastly different footing than it has experienced for the previous three centuries, and this had a massive impact on the relationship between the Church and the surrounding culture.

Christianity prior to the Constantinian Settlement did not have Niebuhr's five paradigms of engagement with culture – there was no viable engagement with culture apart from day-to-day life, since for the most part Christianity was banned in the empire as a 'secret society,' and membership in the church was often punishable by death. The types of social and cultural engagement that post-Constantinian Christianity came to take for granted were unheard of prior to that emperor's Edict of Toleration and consequent favor toward the Church. Constantine's legalization of Christianity has not been reviewed with favor by most Christian historians, since it made the levers of civil power available to professing Christians, particularly clergy, in such increasing numbers that many adopted the religion for its social and civic potential and not from true conversion. Between the imperial reigns of Constantine I and Theodosius I, approximately sixty-five years, "Christianity was transformed from a movement located on the margins of society into the official religion of the Roman Empire, from being perceived as a threat to the security of the empire into a



Wilbert Shenk (1935-2021)

guardian of the status quo. Such a profound change in the identity of the church could not fail to have far-reaching implications. Indeed Europe would be known as Christendom until the twentieth century."²⁰¹ Clapp adds, "Before Constantine, Christians had known as a fact of experience that the Church existed, but had to believe against ap-

²⁰¹ Shenk, Wilbert R. "New Wineskins for New Wine: Toward a Post-Christendom Ecclesiology" *International Bulletin of Missionary Research*, 29, No. 2 (April 2005); 73.

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pearances that Christ ruled over the world. After Constantine one knew as a fact of experience that Christ was ruling over the world, but had to believe against the evidence that there existed a believing Church.”²⁰²

This paradigm of Church-State relations prevailed for over 1,600 years, even in countries such as the United States operating under a ‘separation’ principle between the two entities. The role of the Church within society, especially Western society, was assumed at least until the middle of the 20th Century. But the influence of the Enlightenment of the 18th Century was at work, and the fall of the utopian, ‘Victorian’ expectation of the 19th Century – not least through two horrific ‘world’ wars – effectively destroyed the Constantinian Settlement. Christianity has all but been banished from the public forum and can hope for no assistance from the State; indeed, its banishment is becoming more and more the *policy* of Western governments as Christianity is often singled out among religions as ‘least favored religion’ status in countries in which it was once the dominant religious voice.

This cessation of the Constantinian situation is something that many modern evangelicals refuse to acknowledge or, acknowledging it, strive through political means to reinstate it. This is to assume the validity of the original settlement as an undeniable example of the perfect will of God, that what Constantine did was an unadulterated good in itself. That much is highly debatable. But this attitude of either denial or longing for return also fails to read the providential writing on the 21st Century wall: there will be no return to Constantinianism, and that is not necessarily a bad thing.

Now that the long Constantinian age has all but passed, we Christians find ourselves in a situation much more closely analogous to that of New Testament Christians that the Christendom for which some nostalgically long...With Constantinianism finally buried, theologians and biblical scholars find themselves able to reclaim and present again to the church, the politics of Jesus.²⁰³

²⁰² Clapp, Rodney “Practicing the Politics of Jesus” in *The Church as Counterculture*; Michael L. Budde & Robert W. Brimlow, eds. (New York: State University of New York Press; 2000); 17.

²⁰³ *Ibid.*; 18-19.

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In modern terminology, 'the politics of Jesus' would probably qualify as 'passive/aggressive.' It has been widely assumed, especially within the pietist and anabaptist forms of Christianity, that Jesus was apolitical and that his disciples followed that political neutrality in the early Church. This conclusion is to miss two important aspects of both early Church history and early Church language. On the first score, the early Christians did not possess the least bit of political power or influence; they did not live in a democratic republic, they were generally from the lower and slave classes of an imperial dynasty. Even the Apostle Paul did not gain any political or civic advantage from the fact of his inherited Roman citizenship. To expect political activism within the first three centuries of the Church is to posit an anachronism – to telescope the Constantinian Settlement to the centuries before it actually occurred. Conversely, the absence of political activism within the New Testament and the early Church does not automatically rule out such activities for later generations of the Church, living under more democratic political systems. Political activism in any era must be weighed against the biblical teachings regarding the identity and purpose of the Church according to its timeless characteristics.

The other aspect of New Testament literature concerning both Jesus and His disciples is the use of language that would have been considered politically charged even in that time. For instance, the title *kurios* – Lord – had a wide range of meaning from the polite 'sir' to the title of the Emperor himself. Augustus was the realm's *kurios* as well as its *soter* – Savior. And certainly Jesus' proclamation of a 'kingdom' was anything but politically neutral, as we see during His trials before Herod and Pilate. For whatever reason – perhaps to justify his verdict or to aggravate the Jews – Pilate saw purpose in placing the title 'King of the Jews' above Jesus on the cross, in the three languages of Palestine – Hebrew, Latin, and Greek. Clearly the people who first heard Jesus understood His message to have political implications, even if His methods were not in keeping with any political party or process.

The linguistic evidence continues. Clapp notes that even the Greek word *evangel* – 'good news' or, as it has come to be translated in most English New Testaments, 'gos-

pel' – was frequently used in reference to an imperial announcement of particular note, “a public proclamation of, say, a war won, borne by a herald who ran back to the city and, with his welcome political news, occasioned public celebration.”²⁰⁴ The Emperor would issue an ‘evangel’ announcing the birth of an heir, or the accession of the imperial heir to the throne. To be sure, the word had the general sense of any good news, but this particular sense used in the political arena, along with the previous terms noted, gave a distinctly political and even rebellious edge to the Christian message. This passive/aggressive language continues in the Pauline epistles, where if anything it is intensified.

The very name of the new organization or organism formed by Jesus Christ through His death and resurrection, and the outpouring of the Holy Spirit, has powerful political overtones. *Ekklēsia*, was from the 5th Century before Christ the common term used for the assembly of citizens called together to decide political matters impacting the common welfare.²⁰⁵ While its usage in the New Testament may have more to do with the fact that it was the Greek word used in the Septuagint to translate the Hebrew *qahal*, or ‘assembly,’ even that was a political assembly in ancient Israel. Its usage by early believers would call to mind one thing among Jewish hearers, another thing among Greek and Roman hearers, but in both cases a significant political connotation would come through.

But as significant as are the words *used* by the writers of the New Testament and the early Church fathers, equally significant are the words they *did not* use. The later rise of gnosticism notwithstanding, the New Testament and early Church did not refer to the assembly of believers in any locale in terms of the many ‘mystery’ religions and cults that existed within the Mediterranean world of that time. Groups of people in the Roman world could apply for permission to exist as a *cultus privatus* – a private cult – for the purposes of offering sacrifices to a particular god, or to help defray the burial costs of members, or other reasons legitimate within the Roman pantheism of the day.

²⁰⁴ *Ibid.*; 21.

²⁰⁵ *Idem.*

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The apostles did not do this, not even the one who was himself a Roman citizen and might have had recourse to this legal protection on behalf of his churches. Clapp notes that “instead of adopting the language of privatized mystery religions, the church confronted Caesar, not exactly *on* his own terms, but *with* his own terms.”²⁰⁶

Perhaps the most powerful political aspect of the early Church was its presence as a completely new cultural entity within the broader society – not a new religion as much as a new people. Peter uses Old Testament language to refer to the *ekklēsia* as “*a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, His own special people, that you may proclaim the praises of Him who called you out of darkness into His marvelous light; who once were not a people but are now the people of God, who had not obtained mercy but now have obtained mercy.*”²⁰⁷ What was most noticeable about early Christians is their distinctive separated-ness, together. This was, of course, also characteristic of Jews, but Christians held themselves apart from the Jews as well. “Thus the church was seen, by itself and others, as a ‘third race,’ neither Jew nor Gentile but a new and holy nation or people.”²⁰⁸ This perspective is evident in early Christian writings such as the 2nd Century *Letter to Diognetus*,

Christians are not distinguished from other men by country, language, nor by the customs which they observe. They do not inhabit cities of their own, use a particular way of speaking, nor lead a life marked out by any curiosity. The course of conduct they follow has not been devised by the speculation and deliberation of inquisitive men. They do not, like some, proclaim themselves the advocates of merely human doctrines.

Instead, they inhabit both Greek and barbarian cities, however things have fallen to each of them. And it is while following the customs of the natives in clothing, food, and the rest of ordinary life that they display to us their wonderful and admittedly striking way of life. They live in their own countries, but they do so as those who are just passing through. As citizens they participate in everything with others, yet they endure everything as if they were foreigners. Every foreign land is like their homeland to them, and every land of their birth is like a land of strangers. They marry, like everyone else, and they have children, but they do not destroy their offspring. They share a common table,

²⁰⁶ *Ibid.*; 22. Italics original.

²⁰⁷ I Peter 2:9-10

²⁰⁸ Clapp; 28.

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but not a common bed. They exist in the flesh, but they do not live by the flesh. They pass their days on earth, but they are citizens of heaven. They obey the prescribed laws, all the while surpassing the laws by their lives.

They love all men and are persecuted by all. They are unknown and condemned. They are put to death and restored to life. They are poor, yet make many rich. They lack everything, yet they overflow in everything. They are dishonored, and yet in their very dishonor they are glorified; they are spoken ill of and yet are justified; they are reviled but bless; they are insulted and repay the insult with honor; they do good, yet are punished as evildoers; when punished, they rejoice as if raised from the dead. They are assailed by the Jews as barbarians; they are persecuted by the Greeks; yet those who hate them are unable to give any reason for their hatred.²⁰⁹

Paul makes it clear to the Corinthians that he expected them to function within themselves as a *polis* – a full political community capable of seeing and meeting the needs of that community. In one matter in particular, that of civil suits, the apostle establishes the self-contained nature of the *ekklēsia*, independent of the surrounding world.

Dare any of you, having a matter against another, go to law before the unrighteous, and not before the saints? Do you not know that the saints will judge the world? And if the world will be judged by you, are you unworthy to judge the smallest matters? Do you not know that we shall judge angels? How much more, things that pertain to this life? If then you have judgments concerning things pertaining to this life, do you appoint those who are least esteemed by the church to judge? I say this to your shame. Is it so, that there is not a wise man among you, not even one, who will be able to judge between his brethren? But brother goes to law against brother, and that before unbelievers! (I Corinthians 6:1-6)

Again, this was the pattern inherited from Christianity's Jewish heritage, but the early Church quickly distanced itself from Judaism and became its own entity. Thus, "Biblical narrative logic simply demands a specific, visible people, a society or societal remnant, a *polis*."²¹⁰ This fact lies at the root of the matter regarding the Church in the world, though it does not immediately spell out just how the new *polis* will manifest it-

²⁰⁹ Author Unknown, *Letter to Diognetus*, Chapter 5. [Letter to Diognetus \(christian-history.org\)](http://christian-history.org). Accessed 05September2023.

²¹⁰ Clapp; 30.

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self in each cultural context throughout the remaining ‘time in between.’ It should be fairly obvious, though from modern evangelicalism’s intense politicization it is evidently not, that the Constantinian Settlement did not work, and that its passing is by no means a misfortune for the Church. Though it may not have been his intention, Constantine’s legalizing and favoring of Christianity served only to put the new wine into old wineskins; it was only a matter of time til they burst.

New Wine in New Wineskins

The scribes and Pharisees castigated Jesus because His disciples did not fast as their disciples did, to which Jesus responded that the time would come when His disciples would also fast. But in the same context, and highlighting the radically new thing that He represented, the Lord gave His famous parable of the wineskins,

Then He spoke a parable to them: “No one puts a piece from a new garment on an old one; otherwise the new makes a tear, and also the piece that was taken out of the new does not match the old. And no one puts new wine into old wineskins; or else the new wine will burst the wineskins and be spilled, and the wineskins will be ruined. But new wine must be put into new wineskins, and both are preserved.” (Luke 5:36-38)

Although Paul does not repeat the wineskin reference, his emphasis throughout his letters on the newness of what has happened in and through Christ brings his teaching on the Church into direct alignment with what Jesus said regarding new wine. Indeed, Jesus’ parable is paradigmatic of the entire life of the Church, not least its existence in – and in the presence of – the world. Paul’s statement, for instance, that “*the weapons of our warfare are not carnal...*” is of the same sense as Jesus’ wineskin parable. So also the apostle’s “*our citizenship is from heaven*” and “*do not be unequally yoked with unbelievers*” represent the same paradigm of new wineskins for the new wine of the gospel community.

Unfortunately, most modern evangelical reference to ‘new wineskins’ is in the context of changing the message of the Church to meet changing cultural milieu, which is not what Jesus had in mind. Shenk, late professor emeritus of Mission History and

Contemporary Culture at Fuller Seminary – a chair title that strongly indicates its accommodationist bent – writes, “The church must stay abreast of its changing cultural context, which will require the dismantling of archaic forms that impede missionary witness and the devising of new structures that support the mission.”²¹¹ The difficulty with statements like this one is that it contains a measure of historical truth while it guides the Church away from biblical truth. The historical truth is that the Church has all too often confused the prevailing culture with biblical Christianity, itself a byproduct of the Constantinian Settlement as it has been worked out in the ecclesio-political environment of Europe over the centuries. Christianity thus took on the shape and form of the Holy Roman Empire of the High Middle Ages, or that of Victorian morals and sensibilities in the 19th Century, or of the Republican Party in the United States of our own time. ‘Missions’ has often meant little more than the exportation of these cultural norms to vastly different cultures – *i.e.*, British missions in China in the late 19th Century – under the guise of Christianity. This happens, and is still happening, and should not happen.

The rub comes in with Shenk’s comment that the Church must not only dismantle, but also ‘devise new structures’ in the light of changing cultural contexts. This is Niebuhr’s accommodationist view, plain and simple, and it is not the ‘new wineskins’ of which Jesus speaks. Early in the article, Shenk strongly advocates generational changes in the Church’s understanding and implementation of the gospel,

The new ecclesial varieties of this century are emerging from a wide array of linguistic-cultural contexts. We are beginning to recognize that from this diversity of sources we are starting to reap a harvest of new insights and fresh perspectives on the meaning of the Gospel, the varied ways it is being experienced by believers across the world, and the implications this *reformation* holds for the mission of each church.²¹²

But did Jesus or His disciples anticipate each generation of the Church gaining ‘new insights and fresh perspectives on the meaning of the Gospel’? If we want to

²¹¹ Shenk; 78.

²¹² *Ibid.*; 73. Italics original.

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know what Jesus meant by the new wine being put into new wineskins, we need to read Paul. He was given the understanding that the new wine of the New Covenant, the new wine of the gospel, was being put into the new wineskin of the Church, a community built along totally different and in most cases diametrically-opposed lines than *any* culture in which she would be found. The old wineskin of Judaism, sufficient for the Old Covenant vintage, could not contain the new wine – literally, could not contain the gospel within the strictures of the Law and of the ‘works of the Law’ – circumcision, Sabbath-observance, and dietary regulations. But neither can the pagan cults contain the new wine, though this would have been more self-evident to the earliest believers, even though the reach of the gospel was intended to all mankind and all creation. Thus Paul constantly commended Gentile believers for turning away from the primordial lie of paganism, while also resisting any turning back toward Mosaic Judaism by either Jewish or Gentile believers.

*And you became followers of us and of the Lord, having received the word in much affliction, with joy of the Holy Spirit, so that you became examples to all in Macedonia and Achaia who believe. For from you the word of the Lord has sounded forth, not only in Macedonia and Achaia, but also in every place. Your faith toward God has gone out, so that we do not need to say anything. For they themselves declare concerning us what manner of entry we had to you, and how **you turned to God from idols** to serve the living and true God, and to wait for His Son from heaven, whom He raised from the dead, even Jesus who delivers us from the wrath to come.*

(I Thessalonians 1:6-10)

O foolish Galatians! Who has bewitched you that you should not obey the truth, before whose eyes Jesus Christ was clearly portrayed among you as crucified? This only I want to learn from you: Did you receive the Spirit by the works of the law, or by the hearing of faith? Are you so foolish? Having begun in the Spirit, are you now being made perfect by the flesh? Have you suffered so many things in vain – if indeed it was in vain?

(Galatians 3:1-4)

These are just two of many passages in which Paul directs his readers to ‘the Way,’ a path and pattern of life that is the practical reality of the new wineskins into which Christ pours His Spirit, the Spirit of regeneration and of new creation. Contrary to Shenk’s advice that the Church must ‘dismantle and devise,’ Paul refuses such accommodation with any culture, knowing that the culture of any society of any era is

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merely a form of this age *which is passing away*. Instead, he exhorts all believers in every age and culture, “do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, that you may prove what is that good and acceptable and perfect will of God.”²¹³ The ‘new wineskins’ are the new humans of the regeneration, the spiritual resurrection that anticipates the final, physical resurrection. The old wineskins of Judaism cannot contain it, nor can the corrupted wineskins of paganism. “The gospel is not just the illustration (even the best illustration) of an idea. It is the story of actions by which the human situation is irreversibly changed.”²¹⁴

What is remarkable about the new wineskin of the Church, apart from the remarkable fact that it constitutes a New Creation and a New Humanity, is that it still maintains a purposeful connection with the old creation and the old humanity. The problem has come in as the Church has attempted either to revert to the old wineskin of Judaism, or to mix the new wine with the paganism of the surrounding culture. The Constantinian Settlement, for instance, poured the new wine into the amphorae of pagan culture and pagan government, vessels wholly unsuited to contain the gospel. It would seem that a fact to be rediscovered in every generation is that the Church is a *tertium quid* – a third thing, neither ancient Judaism in a modern form, nor a sanitized impression of the contemporary culture. This latter error is by far the most prevalent in ‘Christendom’ as there is in Western evangelicalism very little understanding of ancient Judaism, and still less desire to return to it (though that desire does indeed exist even among modern Christians who have no Jewish heritage). The more common manifestation of accommodation is the tendency to turn ‘Christian’ into an adjective. But this is usually nothing more than the attempt to put the new wine into contemporary cultural wineskins. “This is why it is always dangerous to aspire to a ‘Christian culture’ or, by extension, a Christian government, a Christian political party, a Christian business, and the like.”²¹⁵

²¹³ Romans 12:2

²¹⁴ Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*; 166.

²¹⁵ *Ibid.*; 234.

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If there is not an objective, biblical description of the new wineskins, and if each generation of the Church must seek out ‘new insights and fresh perspectives,’ it is hard to see how Christianity can avoid being “tossed to and fro and carried about with every wind of doctrine, by the trickery of men, in the cunning craftiness of deceitful plotting .”²¹⁶ Looking to the ever-changing cultural milieu or ethnic venue of the Gospel puts culture in the driver’s seat and relegates the message preached to the passenger role (sometimes to the ‘way back’ of the minivan or station wagon). The “faith which was once for all delivered to the saints”²¹⁷ becomes a faith that is delivered ‘fresh’ with every new generational, socio-economic, cultural, or ethnic application. Timeless truth disappears, and an acculturated message is developed by each church in its own setting. While this scenario fits well within the post-Enlightenment, post-modern, post-truth age of the early 21st Century, it is hard to see any *real* truth in it, and hard to see any hope.

Paul had a different plan, a plan that we must agree was both inspired by and approved by the Holy Spirit. That plan was to “hold fast the pattern of sound words which you have heard from me, in faith and love which are in Christ Jesus.”²¹⁸ Nor were these sound words to remain with Timothy, the first generation from the apostles; they were to be passed on generation-by-generation throughout time, a task that the apostle likens to the service of a soldier:

You therefore, my son, be strong in the grace that is in Christ Jesus. And the things that you have heard from me among many witnesses, commit these to faithful men who will be able to teach others also. You therefore must endure hardship as a good soldier of Jesus Christ. No one engaged in warfare entangles himself with the affairs of this life, that he may please him who enlisted him as a soldier. And also if anyone competes in athletics, he is not crowned unless he competes according to the rules. The hardworking farmer must be first to partake of the crops. Consider what I say, and may the Lord give you understanding in all things. (II Timothy 2:1-7)

To think that the Lord intended His Church to modify the message of the Gospel with each new cultural or ethnic application of it must be seen as nothing more or less

²¹⁶ Ephesians 4:14

²¹⁷ Jude 3

²¹⁸ II Timothy 1:13

than accommodation to culture, which historically has never ended well for the gospel. The “*foolishness of Christ crucified*” remains the gospel message in the 21st Century as it was in the 1st, and it is no less foolish and no less powerful. It is undeniably harder to do this in a post-Christian, post-Constantinian world, a world in which God is either no longer acknowledged or no longer accepted as even remotely the God of biblical revelation. The Church must indeed recognize this new *Sitz im Leben*,

Another way to describe the dilemma for religious faith is that pluralism creates social conditions in which God is no longer and inevitability. While it is possible to believe in God, one has to work much harder at it because the framework of belief is no longer present to sustain it. The presumption of God and of his active presence in the world cannot be easily sustained because the most important symbols of social, economic, political, and aesthetic life no longer point to him. God is simply less obvious than he once was, and for most no longer obvious at all – quite the opposite.²¹⁹

In order to adopt the accommodationist viewpoint of new wineskins with each generation, one must alter the structure of the congregation as we find it in the New Testament. This is what Shenk does in his article, even going so far as to argue that the New Testament gives no evidence of or interest in the polity of the churches. Concluding that every church’s sole responsibility is ‘missional,’ he advocates the broadest possible structure and polity – structure and polity to be determined by the cultural or ethnic milieu rather than the New Testament. “I have concluded that the New Testament leaves no doubt as to the fundamental purpose of the church but does not prescribe a polity or form of the church.”²²⁰ This is a remarkable statement considering the strong and consistent evidence of eldership in the local congregations, evidence gleaned from Luke’s historical account of the early church as well as from the letters of Paul and Peter (with an oblique reference in one of John’s epistles). But the issue concerning polity is not just ‘getting it right,’ but recognizing that the biblical polity was established by the Lord in order to establish every church in the Truth, enabling every church to withstand

²¹⁹ Hunter; 203.

²²⁰ Shenk; 79.

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the onslaught of cultural opposition, persecution, and marginalization, while staying the course.

If we accept the identification of the pastor-teacher in Ephesians 4 with the elders of elsewhere in Acts and the Pastoral Epistles, we see the consistency of the Pauline polity with the purpose of *“holding fast the pattern of sound words.”* We have had occasion in an earlier session of these Pauline Studies to investigate the nature (and normative characteristic) of the elder-led congregation. The reminder here is that such organization was established by the risen Lord, as Paul teaches us in Ephesians 4.

And He Himself gave some to be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, and some pastors and teachers. (Ephesians 4:11)

But polity has a purpose, and Paul immediately sets forth that purpose – particularly the purpose of the pastor-teacher, or elder.

...for the equipping of the saints for the work of ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ, till we all come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to a perfect man, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ; that we should no longer be children, tossed to and fro and carried about with every wind of doctrine, by the trickery of men, in the cunning craftiness of deceitful plotting, but, speaking the truth in love, may grow up in all things into Him who is the head – Christ – from whom the whole body, joined and knit together by what every joint supplies, according to the effective working by which every part does its share, causes growth of the body for the edifying of itself in love. (Ephesians 4:12-16)

The properly-functioning eldership is the lineage of II Timothy 2:2 – those who through the generations have received from their predecessors the pattern of sound words originating with Paul, and have passed them along faithfully to the next generation. This is the bulwark of the Church against the vain philosophy that so easily takes captive the minds of men, even believers (*cp.* Col. 2:8). This is the sturdy mooring that prevents the congregation from being *tossed to and fro and carried about with every wind of doctrine.* It may seem too much to say, but biblical eldership is a vital and indispensable component of the new wineskins. Churches have perennially moved toward a ‘corporate’ model of polity, or the ‘CEO’ model of senior pastor and pastoral staff, without

thereby securing the faithful transition of the gospel message to the next generation. Biblical eldership is not the be-all and end-all of generational faithfulness, but it has been argued meaningfully that it is at least a *sine qua non* of such faithfulness.

Deviation from biblical polity was perhaps not so visibly detrimental to the life and health of the Church during the centuries of the Constantinian Settlement, when Christianity itself played a significant, and sometimes dominant, role within Western society. But the forces that have atomized that society have also negated Constantinianism; the Church is at best a marginalized and emasculated ‘force’ in modern Western culture – fast becoming an irrelevance. Many, if not most, Western evangelicals continue to strive to re-establish the Constantinian relationship between Church and Society; that will not do as Constantine is not coming back. We will discuss political activism in greater detail in a subsequent lesson. For now it suffices to acknowledge, as ‘sons of Issachar,’ the nature of our times and to recognize the Church’s altered position. Hunter provides a strong and accurate assessment,

What has been missing is a leadership that comprehends the nature of these challenges and offers a vision of formation adequate to the task of discipling the church and its members for times such as ours. By misreading the nature of the times and by focusing so much energy and resources on politics, those who have claimed the mantle of leadership have fixed attention on secondary and tertiary problems and false solutions.²²¹

It is not time for a ‘new insight’ or ‘fresh perspective’; rather it is time to hear again the teachings of Paul regarding the community of believers and its role both within and without. It is not time to decide conclusively that the Church should relate with the surrounding culture according to this or that Niebuhrian paradigm; rather it is time to recognize that the Church is the New Humanity, a new community of mankind that has been created not according to the old wineskins of social, economic, political, religious or other strata, but according to “*the truth as it is in Christ Jesus.*”

²²¹ Hunter; 226. Italics original.

Lesson 9 – A Case Study: Corinth
Text: I Corinthians 5:1-13; II Corinthians 6:14-18

*“A theology of faithful presence
is a theology of engagement
in and with the world around us.”*
(James Davison Hunter)

None of the Pauline churches was quite so troublesome to the apostle as that of Corinth. The churches in Galatia, to be sure, were in danger of falling from grace, but they at least had exhibited fond affection and care for Paul when he was there (*cp.* Gal. 4:13-15), whereas in Corinth he seemed constantly to have to defend himself, his apostolate, and his message. Just about every problem that could be imagined facing a young church turned up in Corinth, and the two epistles that we have are almost entirely polemical and corrective in nature. ‘That we have,’ is because each letter – I Corinthians and II Corinthians – refers to another, previous letter that, in the case of II Corinthians, does not appear to be the other one that we have. In other words, our I and II Corinthians might actually be Paul’s II and IV Corinthians. Be that as it may, it is hard to imagine *additional* problems in the church that possession of the ‘other’ letters would bring to light; things were bad enough in Corinth as it was.

What makes Corinth pertinent to this particular study – aside from the fact that it is Scripture and that the two letters constitute the longest treatise from Paul to an individual church – is the striking similarity between the modern West and ancient Corinth. A Roman city in the midst of the ancient Greek world; a thriving commercial center that attracted visitors and emigrees from around the Mediterranean Basin as well as the Near East; Corinthian society was no less



William M. Ramsay (1851-1939)

pluralistic than 21st Century America. William Ramsay, in his famous *St. Paul the Traveler and the Roman Citizen*, writes, “Corinth stood on the highroad between Rome and the

East; and was therefore one of the greatest centres of influence in the Roman world.”²²² Gordon Fee summarizes his findings by saying, “All of this evidence together suggests that Paul’s Corinth was at once the New York, Los Angeles, and Las Vegas of the ancient world.”²²³ The evidence Fee refers to is well attested by both written records and archaeological discovery.

In Paul’s day Corinth was both an ancient city and a relatively modern one. Ancient, in that it was founded in Greek antiquity and was a leading player in the Greco-Persian Wars as well as the Peloponnesian Wars. Located on the Peloponnesian side of the Isthmus of Corinth, it was about equidistant between the two great rivals of the ancient Grecian world: Athens to the east and Sparta to the south. This, of



course, made Corinth a political pawn in the great politics of the two powerful city-states who grappled for overall suzerainty of the Greek world during the centuries leading up to Alexander the Great. When these two powers punched themselves drunk, Corinth arose as a leading city-state in the 2nd Century BC, a fact that put the city in the crosshairs of the expanding Roman Empire. Corinth was destroyed in 146 BC by the Roman consul Lucius Mummius, in typical Roman fashion, and thus lay desolate until eventually resurrected and rebuilt by Julius Caesar in 44 BC.

Caesar’s intent was to make Corinth a Roman colony for freedman from the capital, where their number was growing exponential and their existence posed potential political issues that he wanted to avoid. By locating this freedman’s colony on the old site of ancient Corinth, Caesar also intended to create for Rome a strong, commercial center between the Gulf of Corinth and the Saronic Gulf, creating a safe maritime ‘road’ between Italy and the Near East. In addition, Corinth controlled the land route between

²²² Ramsay, William M. *St. Paul the Traveler and the Roman Citizen* (London: Hodder and Stoughton; 1907); 256.

²²³ Fee, Gordon *The First Epistle to the Corinthians* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company; 1987); 3.

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the mainland of Achaea and the Peloponnesian peninsula. Caesar's plan succeeded beyond anyone's expectations, and within fifty years the geographer Strabo was writing of Corinth,

Corinth is called 'wealthy' because of its commerce, since it is situated on the Isthmus and is master of two harbours, of which the one leads straight to Asia, and the other to Italy; and it makes easy the exchange of merchandise from both countries that are so far distant from each other.²²⁴

In the same section, Strabo notes another laurel in Corinth's crown: it came to host the Isthmian Games, second in prestige only to the Olympic Games. It is probably not exaggerating to say that the rebuilt, Greco-Roman Corinth was the most cosmopolitan, and hence most *pluralistic*, city in the entire Mediterranean world, if not the entire world itself. But the city also carried a reputation for immorality, both in its ancient Greek manifestation and its more modern Roman form. The 5th Century BC Greek philosopher Aristophanes coined the word, *korinthiazō* – 'to act like a Corinthian' – as a designation for fornication.²²⁵ Fee questions whether the notorious immorality was as much a feature of Roman Corinth as it was of the Old City, but it is enough to read Paul's two letters to the church in Corinth to realize that, at best, it was a typical maritime commercial center, "where money flowed and women and men were available."²²⁶

Corinth, therefore, makes for an excellent case study on what we have been discussing up to this point. Constantinianism certainly did not apply to Corinth in Paul's day; the city was firmly under the thumb of the Roman Emperor, and Christianity was considered, at best, a sub-sect of the despised but legal Judaism, or, at worst, a prohibited secret society that was to be eradicated. It is evident, as well, that the gospel appealed foremost to the lower classes of Corinthians society; it may even have been held in some level of contempt by the upper classes – even those who joined its assemblies (which would at least partially account for the Pauline polemic of I Corinthians 11 con-

²²⁴ Strabo 8.6.21. [Strabo, Geography, Book 8 \(tufts.edu\)](https://www.tufts.edu/~lstrabo/Geography/Book%208.htm). Accessed 11September2023.

²²⁵ Fee; 2.

²²⁶ *Ibid.*; 3.

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cerning the ‘love feasts’). At the very least, we know that the church in Corinth was divided into factions, which may reflect the factious nature of Corinthian society at large. It was undoubtedly an environment of social stratification, which became an unwonted characteristic of the Christian church there.

Now I plead with you, brethren, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you all speak the same thing, and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be perfectly joined together in the same mind and in the same judgment. For it has been declared to me concerning you, my brethren, by those of Chloe’s household, that there are contentions among you. Now I say this, that each of you says, “I am of Paul,” or “I am of Apollos,” or “I am of Cephas,” or “I am of Christ.” Is Christ divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Or were you baptized in the name of Paul? (I Corinthians 1:10-13)

And I, brethren, could not speak to you as to spiritual people but as to carnal, as to babes in Christ. I fed you with milk and not with solid food; for until now you were not able to receive it, and even now you are still not able; for you are still carnal. For where there are envy, strife, and divisions among you, are you not carnal and behaving like mere men? For when one says, “I am of Paul,” and another, “I am of Apollos,” are you not carnal? (I Corinthians 3:1-4)

Now in giving these instructions I do not praise you, since you come together not for the better but for the worse. For first of all, when you come together as a church, I hear that there are divisions among you, and in part I believe it. For there must also be factions among you, that those who are approved may be recognized among you. Therefore when you come together in one place, it is not to eat the Lord’s Supper. For in eating, each one takes his own supper ahead of others; and one is hungry and another is drunk. What! Do you not have houses to eat and drink in? Or do you despise the church of God and shame those who have nothing? What shall I say to you? Shall I praise you in this? I do not praise you. (I Corinthians 11:17-22)

A brief case study on the church at Corinth is justified not only by the cultural similarities between 1st Century Corinth and 21st Century America, but also by the emphasis Paul makes on the sanctity and unity of the *church*. He does not merely issue a condemnation of immoral behavior, though that would be justified; rather, he focuses on the impact of that immorality, and the division, on the church itself: “*Or do you despise the church of God...?*” The Corinthian church stands as a timeless reminder of the Church in the World, mainly because it is an example of too much of the World in the Church. “Although they were the Christian church in Corinth, an inordinate amount of

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Corinth was yet in them, emerging in a number of attitudes and behaviors that required radical surgery without killing the patient. This is what 1 Corinthians attempt to do.”²²⁷

It is an oversimplification to say, but Paul’s Corinthian letters are as ethical and practical as his Roman letter is theological. This is not to say that there is no theology in I & II Corinthians or practical application in Romans. It is merely to take note of the fact that Romans, written to a congregation that Paul had not founded, is focused on the content and meaning of the gospel that Paul preached, whereas the two Corinthian epistles, written to a church that the apostle not only founded, but spent eighteen months ministering to, deals vigorously with the problems that were troubling that congregation; and the problems were many. What is significant about Paul’s handling of each individual problem is the way he brings the discussion back to the meaning of the Body of Christ, the Church. The sins and errors of the Corinthian believers ought to be self-evident to them, as Paul considers the matter. Their lack of awareness that faction and fornication are unacceptable behavior within the community of believers is proof to the apostle that they lack understanding of what the Church really is. Thus the rhetorical questions like, “*Do you not know that you are a temple of God, and that the Spirit of God dwells in you?*”²²⁸ When Paul asks, “*Do you not know,*” it is because his readers *should* know, but are acting ignorantly, out of character with their profession.

What ties the church at Corinth into our discussion of the Church in the World is, as mentioned above, just how much the World was in the Church there. It has been somewhat commonplace to associate the divisions within the Corinthian congregation with differing theological positions. But there are at least two problems with this interpretation. The first is that Paul spends very little time discusses conflicting theological doctrines that might have been causing schism. The notable exception is his treatise on the resurrection in I Corinthians 15, but otherwise he seems to deal with life issues – marriage, benevolence, ‘food sacrificed to idols,’ etc. Again, lest there be misunderstanding, Paul deals with each of these issues *theologically*. This observation is simply to

²²⁷ Fee; 4.

²²⁸ I Corinthians 3:16

note that there is no definitive linkage between the different ‘factions’ and particular doctrinal issues.

The second point regarding the traditional interpretation is that the wording that Paul uses echoes the standard terms used in Greco-Roman society to denote the various social strata of 1st Century life. While it is evident that the majority of the Corinthian congregation was of low socio-economic status (*cp.* I Cor. 1:26-28), there were also clearly some influential and wealthy members of the community, and it appears that the typical Roman *patron* relationship was prevailing in the Christian community in Corinth, a Roman colony. This is the perspective interpretation of Larry Wellborn, professor at Fordham University, in his article, “On the Discord in Corinth: I Corinthians 1-4 and Ancient Politics.” In this article, Wellborn exegetes several significant terms that Paul uses with regard to the problems within the Corinthian church, words like *skisma*, the Greek word from which we get the English, *schism*. Wellborn points out that this and other terms used in the letter were freighted with socio-political meaning within 1st Century Roman society. He writes, “A *skisma* is a rift, a tear, as in a garment; it is used metaphorically of a cleft in political consciousness.”²²⁹ Wellborn goes on to list numerous non-biblical usages of the term to show the political and civil nature of the term, “The terms with which *skisma* is associated make it clear that it is neither a religious heresy nor a harmless clique that the author has in mind, but factions engaged in a struggle for power.”²³⁰

The situation in Corinth, at least at the time of the first letter, was apparently more dire than simply a preference in preachers, “*I am of Paul, I am of Cephas, I am of Apollos.*” The terminology Paul uses, even the description of the congregation as “*not many wise according to the flesh, not many mighty, not many noble,*” strongly indicates *civil* strife within the community, the strife of competing patrons within the church who were vying for dominance. It is likely that the use of these three names – Paul, Apollos, Cephas – was merely cover for schismatic behavior that none of the three men men-

²²⁹ Wellborn, L. L. “On the Discord in Corinth: I Corinthians 1-4 and Ancient Politics” *Journal of Biblical Literature*, Vol. 106, No. 1 (1987); 86.

²³⁰ *Ibid.*; 87.

tioned would have approved; certainly Paul did not. Even the word used in the report that Paul received from “Chloe’s people” is highly charged in a civil setting. “For I have been informed by Chloe’s people that there are quarrels among you.” The word ‘quarrels’ is the Greek, *erides*. “*Eris* is hot dispute, the emotional flame that ignites whenever rivalry becomes intolerable.”²³¹ Wellborn goes on to note that this is the term used by Plutarch to describe the emotional condition in Rome when news arrived that Julius Caesar had crossed the Rubicon with his legions.

The scenario thus painted by the various words used in connection with the serious divisions and factions within the Corinthian community – and there are quite a number exegeted by Wellborn in his article not mentioned here – is one that would look



John Calvin (1509-64)

quite familiar to any non-Christian group in any Roman city. It was an atmosphere of partisanship based on various, opposed patronages. This is the conclusion that John Calvin arrives at in his commentary. After pointing out what we noted above, that Paul does not devote nearly the same amount of ink to doctrinal and theological issues in his epistles to the

Corinthian church as he does in much smaller letters to other churches, Calvin writes, “I am therefore quite sure that they did not openly detract from the substance of the Gospel in any respect; but since they were burning with a misguided and passionate desire for prominence, I think that they devised a new method of teaching, that was not consistent with the simplicity of Christ; and they hoped that it would make them the objects of people’s admiration.”²³²

The evidence of strife among leading ‘patrons’ of the congregation is confirmed by Paul’s condemnation of their practice of going to court against fellow believers (*cp.* I Cor. 6:1ff). Read from a 21st Century perspective, we often get the impression that this was a common occurrence among all of the believers in Corinth. But in the 1st Century

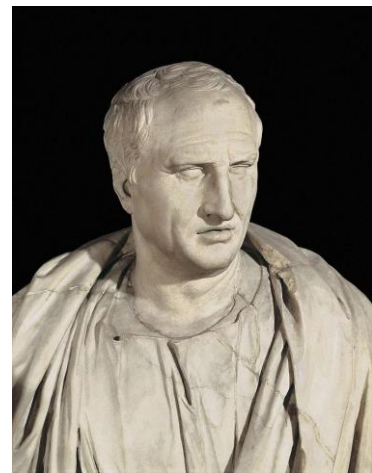
²³¹ *Idem*.

²³² Calvin, *John Calvin’s New Testament Commentaries; Volume 9* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company; 1973); 8.

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the courts were not available to those who were “*not mighty, not noble.*” In short, the majority of the Corinthian congregation would not have had recourse to the court system as we do in the modern world. Those who were taking one another to court would have been the patrons, the wealthy members of the congregation, again seeking to gain advantage over their rivals. “In the ancient world parties engaged in strife regularly made use of the courts as a means of attacking their political opponents.”²³³

The fundamental apostolic charge against the troublemakers in Corinth is that they were “*walking like mere men.*”²³⁴ Seemingly the leaders of however many factions existed were able plausibly to reference either Paul, or Peter, or Apollos as standing behind them in their bid for congregational prominence, but Paul would have none of it. However orthodox their doctrine, their behavior was destructive to the unity and harmony of the community, and for that Paul “*will not praise*” them. This scenario seems further confirmed by the apostle’s discussion of his own speech when he was in their midst, compared to the “*persuasive words of wisdom*” the congregation had apparently grown accustomed to from the factional leaders. With this and similar phrases, Paul is addressing the presence in the Corinthian community of the central instrument or method of gaining patronage within Roman political society: *rhetoric*. Apart from a stellar military career – the opportunity for which was diminishing as the Empire clamped down on its provinces in the 1st Century – the way by which an ambitious man could draw to himself ‘clients,’ and thus increasing political influence and power, was through oratory: the science of rhetoric. The most famous example of this is the ‘new man,’ Marcus Tullius Cicero. Cicero was not of patrician heritage, yet he rose through the political system by virtue of his eloquence and logic, oratorical skills for



Cicero (107-44 BC)

²³³ Wellborn; 107.

²³⁴ I Corinthians 3:3.

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which he remains famous 2,000 year later. Many of the terms used by Paul in his first letter to the Corinthians can be found throughout Cicero's writings concerning advancement, influence, and power in ancient Roman society. But orators like Cicero were, at root, ambitious men, something the contemporary Roman historian Sallust noted. "Some maintained that they were defending the rights of the commons, others that they were upholding the prestige of the senate; but under pretense of the public welfare, each in reality was working for his own advancement."²³⁵ This desire for preeminence among the 'patrons' of the community – probably the wealthier members of the congregation – was destroying the church in Corinth, as it will any congregation. "What threatened the survival of the community of chosen people was not seductive gnostic theology or infectious Judaistic propaganda, but the possibility that its adherents might 'behave like ordinary men.'"²³⁶

This assessment fits with what Paul says about "*those who examine me*" in I Corinthians 9:3. The atmosphere of judgment pervades both letters; the apostle was clearly being maligned by the faction leaders in Corinth and was thus forced to defend himself, while at the same time denying their authority to judge him at all. Consider:

Let a man so consider us, as servants of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God. Moreover it is required in stewards that one be found faithful. But with me it is a very small thing that I should be judged by you or by a human court. In fact, I do not even judge myself. For I know of nothing against myself, yet I am not justified by this; but He who judges me is the Lord.

(I Corinthians 4:1-4)

Am I not an apostle? Am I not free? Have I not seen Jesus Christ our Lord? Are you not my work in the Lord? If I am not an apostle to others, yet doubtless I am to you. For you are the seal of my apostleship in the Lord. My defense to those who examine me is this: Do we have no right to eat and drink? Do we have no right to take along a believing wife, as do also the other apostles, the brothers of the Lord, and Cephas? Or is it only Barnabas and I who have no right to refrain from working? Who ever goes to war at his own expense? Who plants a vineyard and does not eat of its fruit? Or who tends a flock and does not drink of the milk of the flock?

(I Corinthians 9:1-7)

²³⁵ Quoted by Wellborn; 91.

²³⁶ *Ibid.*; 88.

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Oh, that you would bear with me in a little folly—and indeed you do bear with me. For I am jealous for you with godly jealousy. For I have betrothed you to one husband, that I may present you as a chaste virgin to Christ. But I fear, lest somehow, as the serpent deceived Eve by his craftiness, so your minds may be corrupted from the simplicity that is in Christ. For if he who comes preaches another Jesus whom we have not preached, or if you receive a different spirit which you have not received, or a different gospel which you have not accepted—you may well put up with it! For I consider that I am not at all inferior to the most eminent apostles. Even though I am untrained in speech, yet I am not in knowledge. But we have been thoroughly manifested among you in all things. (II Corinthians 11:1-6)

One of the immediate impacts of the apparent patronage, and consequent conflict, within the congregation in Corinth was the oppression and neglect of the poor, those who lacked the social influence of the patrons. These constituted the majority of the congregation, though the situation appears to have been that their powerless social position *outside* the church was being enforced *inside* the church. “Paul’s statements are so revealing that virtually no one doubts that tensions between rich and poor were present in the church.”²³⁷ In addition, it appears that those who were leading the various factions in competition with one another, were the instigators of the dishonorable behavior at the ‘love feast,’ the Communion Supper of I Corinthians 11. These were those who had homes in which to eat, at least sufficiently to preclude any need to monopolize the food at the communion meal. There may have also been the typical separation of tables common in a Roman home, between the patron and his family at the high table, and the clients and poor relegated to lower tiers or even outside in the courtyard. It may also have been the case that those who were dominating in the *charismata*, to their own aggrandizement and not to the edification of the body, were these same faction leaders, these competing patrons. Be that as it may, the picture does seem well painted that the interrelations of the Corinthian believers was ‘carnal,’ little better than the standard social interaction in the world outside the church.

Although both Corinthian epistles are filled with practical instruction and advice from the apostle, the main theme that runs through them is the same as in Paul’s other letters, if possible, intensified. The core of the message is that the believing community

²³⁷ *Ibid.*; 94.

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cannot act like the world; *cannot* maintain within its pale the same socio-economic and political stratification that exists outside in the world. There is no place for patronage in the church. This behavior is carnal, a word meaning ‘natural’ or ‘fleshly.’ Believers can no longer regard one another in this manner, for they are new creations constituting a new humanity.

Therefore, from now on, we regard no one according to the flesh. Even though we have known Christ according to the flesh, yet now we know Him thus no longer. Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; old things have passed away; behold, all things have become new.

(II Corinthians 5:16-17)

How does all of this apply to the modern, Western Church? Western society no longer depends upon the system of patronage that was pervasive in the 1st Century Roman world. Yet the pattern of patronage continued well into the 19th Century, at least, with reserved pew boxes for the landed gentry, where they existed, and the plutocrats, where they replaced the gentry. Though mostly museums now, the church buildings of the 18th & 19th Century in Europe and Colonial America still exhibit the socio-economic stratification that was permitted, even encouraged, in the Christianity of the era. There is a humorous scene in the BBC’s production of *Bleak House* in which the congregation (im)patiently awaits the arrival of Lord and Lady Deadlock, the proprietors of the local manor, Chesney Wold, before the minister can begin the service. Set in Dickens’ mid-19th Century, the scene illustrates the continued influence of patronage into the modern era. The novel does show the disintegration of the exalted status of the aristocracy, as one citizen, the neighbor of Chesney Wold, freely refers to the baronet as ‘Sir Arrogant Numbskull.’ This process of aristocratic disintegration has continued, and now, apart from reserved parking spaces at the church building for the minister, such manifest ecclesiastical favoritism is a thing of the past in most evangelical churches today. But that does not mean that the political environment that permeated the Corinthian congregation is absent from modern, Western (and especially American) congregations.

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The difference is mainly that, in the modern context, individual churches have so completely aligned along political and other socio-economic lines, that what might have been a schism in the 1st Century has become an independent local church in the 21st. Christians today are no less political than they were in Paul's day; if anything, they are more so. Thus at least one important lesson to be gleaned from the apostle's letters to the Corinthian church is that the world's political systems are both divisive and destructive when they are incorporated into the church, no less now than then. The political system, in whatever era it may be found, constitutes the weapons of worldly warfare, so it is quite significant that it is to the hyper-political and patron-driven Corinthian church that Paul writes that famous phrase, *"the weapons of our warfare are not carnal, but divinely powerful for the tearing down of strongholds."*²³⁸

Paul's response to the factions within the Corinthian church is typical of his letters, *"Do you not know?"* is a consistent refrain that the apostle uses to try to show the believers in Corinth that they ought to understand that factions are not simply troublesome because they cause strife, but that they are diametrically opposed to the essence of the true church. Just as sexual immorality is absolutely inconsistent with the believer being *"the temple of the Holy Spirit,"* so also is factionalism, and for the same reason.

Flee sexual immorality. Every sin that a man does is outside the body, but he who commits sexual immorality sins against his own body. Or do you not know that your body is the temple of the Holy Spirit who is in you, whom you have from God, and you are not your own? For you were bought at a price; therefore glorify God in your body and in your spirit, which are God's.

(I Corinthians 6:18-20)

Do you not know that you are the temple of God and that the Spirit of God dwells in you? If anyone defiles the temple of God, God will destroy him. For the temple of God is holy, which temple you are.

(I Corinthians 3:16-17)

In the two letters that we have of Paul to the church in Corinth, the apostle frequently emphasizes the fact that the Gospel which he preached, and which they professed to believe, was a world-and-life message completely different from that with

²³⁸ II Corinthians 10:4

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which they were accustomed. Having just admitted that his message was “*to Jews a stumbling block, and to Gentiles, foolishness,*” Paul elaborates on the nature of the Gospel message in Chapter 2. We must keep firmly in mind that this chapter fits between the apostle’s declaration of the fundamental problem at Corinth – *divisions and factions* – in 1:11-17, and his elaboration of this problem in 3:1-7. We must also keep in mind that even though the Corinthians factions were claiming to be ‘of Paul,’ or ‘of Cephas,’ or ‘of Apollos,’ these three men were not the problem. As far as we can tell from the letter, none of these men were in Corinth at the time. Furthermore, Paul speaks of himself and the others as “*servants through whom you believed.*”²³⁹ It is rather the case that, in typical Roman patronage fashion, the various factions in Corinth were ‘aligning’ themselves with the ‘great’ men of the faith; we can safely assume both without the knowledge or the approbation of these men.

Yet while Paul does diminish the relative importance of himself and Apollos (and by extension, Peter as well) relative to the message preached, his fundamental approach in these letters as in all of his writings is to show the radical difference of that message to anything his readers had experienced before. Since rhetoric was the workhorse of the patronage system, Paul immediately distances himself from any such approach by him to the Corinthians.

And I, brethren, when I came to you, did not come with excellence of speech or of wisdom declaring to you the testimony of God. For I determined not to know anything among you except Jesus Christ and Him crucified. I was with you in weakness, in fear, and in much trembling. And my speech and my preaching were not with persuasive words of human wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power, that your faith should not be in the wisdom of men but in the power of God. (I Corinthians 2:1-5)

Standing by itself, this passage might be the death knell of every homiletics class in seminary – *it is not eloquence but content that matters.*²⁴⁰ But the context defines the meaning, and rather than condemning effective public oratory (something for which

²³⁹ I Corinthians 3:5

²⁴⁰ This is not to say that Homiletics has nothing to say about content, but there is typically a great deal said about preparation and delivery or, in a word, *rhetoric*. Robert Louis Dabney’s treatise on preaching is titled *Sacred Rhetoric*.

Apollos was quite famous within the churches), Paul is turning the minds of his readers *away* from the public rhetoric with which they were so familiar and by which they were often both awed and swayed, *toward* the true, divine wisdom that is presented in the Gospel. Furthermore, given Paul's extensive education, it is perhaps better to interpret his self-deprecation here as more 'tongue in cheek' than as an absolute disparagement of his own speaking abilities. His point seems rather to be that eloquence was not his goal; rhetoric was not his instrument.²⁴¹ Yet that by no means meant that what he (or Cephas, or Apollos) had to say was devoid of wisdom. The wisdom, however, differs from even the best Greco-Roman rhetoric in *kind*, not merely in *degree*.

However, we speak wisdom among those who are mature, yet not the wisdom of this age, nor of the rulers of this age, who are coming to nothing. But we speak the wisdom of God in a mystery, the hidden wisdom which God ordained before the ages for our glory, which none of the rulers of this age knew; for had they known, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory.

(I Corinthians 2:6-8)

This passage is centrally important to Paul's message to the Corinthians and, really, to all the churches to whom he wrote: What we have in the Gospel is *fundamentally* and *essentially* different from what we have known in the world, even in the divinely-enlightened world of Mosaic Judaism. Fee comments, "The wisdom of which Paul is now speaking, he is quick to reassert, is of a radically different kind from that which the Corinthians are currently pursuing, which is 'of this age.'²⁴² The Gospel of Jesus Christ is the *wisdom of God* in a mystery, Paul says. By this he means that the truth of the Gospel is not accessible to mankind through even the highest form of human reason or philosophical wisdom, but is rather revealed by God to His own through His Spirit. "As Paul will develop more fully in Colossians and Ephesians, in the singular the term 'mystery' ordinarily refers to something formerly hidden in God from *all* human eyes but now revealed in history through Christ and made understandable to his people

²⁴¹ Cp. I Corinthians 1:17, "not in cleverness of speech..."

²⁴² Fee, *I Corinthians*; 103.

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through the Spirit.”²⁴³ The contrast Paul is making here is between the wisdom of the world, represented by the patrons and their rhetoric, their *cleverness of speech*, on the one hand, and the wisdom of God through the ‘foolishness’ of the message of a crucified Messiah, on the other. This latter, true wisdom has been hidden from fallen man and is only revealed through the regenerative work of the Holy Spirit via faith in Jesus Christ.

But God has revealed them to us through His Spirit. For the Spirit searches all things, yes, the deep things of God. For what man knows the things of a man except the spirit of the man which is in him? Even so no one knows the things of God except the Spirit of God. Now we have received, not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit who is from God, that we might know the things that have been freely given to us by God. (I Corinthians 2:10-12)

This is a lesson the Church seems in need of relearning with every generation. Tempted in each generation and in each cultural setting, the Church too often retreats to the wisdom of the world - the wisdom that is passing away in each generation - and rejects that wisdom that is from above and is revealed to believers through the enlightenment of the Holy Spirit. Thomas Schreiner writes, “Insight into the true nature of things is a gift of God’s Spirit. God hides his wisdom from the rulers of this age, and the inaccessibility of God’s wisdom to them is verified by their crucifixion of Christ. Conversely, God predestined this wisdom for the eschatological glory of believers...Indeed, the only pathway for understanding the truth about God is the work of the Spirit, for *only* the Spirit knows ‘the things of God.’”²⁴⁴ Here is the crux of the matter for Paul: that the Church does not operate, nor should it even think, according to the *spirit of this world* for the simple reason that it has received *the Spirit who is from God*. The form of this age is passing away, and the spirit of this age is that force, that epistemology, that worldview that is driving the current age into destruction. This applies to any and every age of the earth from the time of Christ’s Ascension to that of His *Parousia*.

Thus Paul addresses the qualitative difference between believers and non-believers, between those who are still ‘of the world,’ and those who are merely ‘in the

²⁴³ *Ibid.*; 105.

²⁴⁴ Schreiner; *Paul*; 262-63.

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world’ but are also ‘in Christ.’ As a guard against the temptation to retreat into the alleged wisdom of the world, the world of patronage and factions, Paul reminds the Corinthians that there is a chasm between the world and the kingdom of Jesus Christ that can be bridged only by grace through faith in Jesus Christ. When believers attempt to go back into the world through thought or action, they are being, as Paul puts it, *carnal* or *fleshly*.

These things we also speak, not in words which man’s wisdom teaches but which the Holy Spirit teaches, comparing spiritual things with spiritual. But the natural man does not receive the things of the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him; nor can he know them, because they are spiritually discerned. But he who is spiritual judges all things, yet he himself is rightly judged by no one. For “who has known the mind of the LORD that he may instruct Him?” But we have the mind of Christ. And I, brethren, could not speak to you as to spiritual people but as to carnal, as to babes in Christ. I fed you with milk and not with solid food; for until now you were not able to receive it, and even now you are still not able; for you are still carnal. For where there are envy, strife, and divisions among you, are you not carnal and behaving like mere men? For when one says, “I am of Paul,” and another, “I am of Apollos,” are you not carnal?

(I Corinthians 2:13-3:4)

Mere men. That is the point of contention between the apostle and the congregation: they were acting as *mere men*. There are other problems, to be sure, though it may be that quite a number of those other issues could be traced to this one. The remedial strategy of the apostle in writing to the Corinthian community follows the twin attributes of a healthy church: *unity* and *holiness*. The apostle’s understanding of the Church as the New Humanity of the inaugurated New Creation demands that these two virtues be essential to both its internal health and its external witness. Both virtues flow out of the union of the Church to her Head, the Lord Jesus Christ. Typically, throughout the history of the Church, it is *holiness* that has been emphasized; Paul emphasizes *unity*. To be sure, he does not in any way disparage holiness, but his goal is not merely *personal piety* among believers, but a *spiritual habitation*, as Peter puts it.²⁴⁵ The Church is the temple of the Holy Spirit which means it is the residence and resting place of the one true God.

²⁴⁵ I Peter 2:5

Lesson 10 - Temple Ecclesiology
Text: I Corinthians 3:9-17

*“The Temple is the moral center of the universe,
the source from which holiness and a terrifying justice radiate.”*
(Jon Levenson)

The impact of Dispensationalism over the past 150 years has been far greater than most evangelicals realize, including most Reformed evangelicals. When Dispensationalism is mentioned, thought and discussion usually goes directly to Eschatology, particularly the Dispensational view of the Tribulation and Rapture. Pre-millennialism,



C. I. Scofield (1843-1921)

however, did not arrive on the Church’s eschatological scene with the advent of C. I. Scofield. Pre-millennial eschatology was associated with some Jewish rabbinic writings in the Second Temple era, and was adopted in the 2nd Century by the Christian apologist Justin Martyr. What is far more impactful (and nefarious) concerning Dispensationalism is its hermeneutic. In this popular form of biblical exegesis and interpretation, Israel is hermetically sealed from the Church and a ‘literal’ hermeneutic is employed in

which anything written concerning the former must be fulfilled literally and only in regard to the physical nation of Israel. There is within Dispensationalism no concept of a ‘grafting in’ of Gentiles into the commonwealth of Israel, in spite of what Paul writes in his epistle to the Ephesian church.

Therefore remember that you, once Gentiles in the flesh – who are called Uncircumcision by what is called the Circumcision made in the flesh by hands – that at that time you were without Christ, being aliens from the commonwealth of Israel and strangers from the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world. But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. For He Himself is our peace, who has made both one, and has broken down the middle wall of separation, having abolished in His flesh the enmity, that is, the law of commandments contained in ordinances, so as to create in Himself one new man from the two, thus making peace, and that He might reconcile them both to God in one body through the cross, thereby putting to death the enmity.
(Ephesians 2:11-16)

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This Dispensational hermeneutic of eternal separation between Israel and the Church wreaks havoc with Pauline ecclesiology, not least with the apostle's classic treatise on the matter in Romans 9-11. What Paul saw as fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy, the Dispensationalist sees at best as figurative speech and at worst as a mistake: since Old Testament prophecies apply solely to the nation of Israel and must be literally fulfilled as to both people and place, they cannot be in anything but a metaphorical sense, fulfilled in the Church. Thus, the literal Temple building must be rebuilt in Jerusalem (though, for most Dispensationalists, the literal king who will reign in that city is not David, but Jesus Christ). This is a misunderstanding of tremendous importance and impact with regard to modern evangelical understanding of the Church – its identity, its purpose, and its future. Dispensational thought has so permeated conservative evangelicalism in the United States for the greater part of the 20th Century, that many professedly Reformed believers fail to see how Dispensational their own thought has become.

Nowhere is this more true than in the New Testament treatment of the 'Temple.' Temple terminology is undeniably used by Jesus, Peter, and Paul, with powerful allusions in John's writings as well. Dispensationalists must acknowledge Jesus' promise to *"rebuild this Temple in three days,"* and cannot escape John's explanation of the remarkable statement: *"But He was speaking of the temple of His body."*²⁴⁶ When Jesus rose from the grave, His disciples remembered His statement and connected the dots; modern Dispensationalists have erased the connecting lines. But when one realizes the purpose of a temple within a religion, and most importantly the purpose of the Tabernacle/Temple complex in biblical thought, it becomes apparent that by putting the Temple idea off into some future millennial kingdom Dispensationalism has emasculated Pauline ecclesiology as well as Pauline eschatology. If the Church is a Temple – and there is irrefutable evidence from the apostolic writings that the early Church considered it to be so – then understanding the meaning and purpose of 'temple' is crucial to understanding the meaning and purpose of the Church. Without the 'temple' idea, the

²⁴⁶ John 2:21

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Church is left to find its own meaning and purpose, and has invariably done both incorrectly.

Yet the theme of the Temple – and under the New Covenant we may properly refer to it as the ‘New Temple’ – cannot be investigated apart from the biblical concept of Creation, and especially that of New Creation. Creation is another major theme in the New Testament, with John’s Gospel famously echoing the opening lines of Genesis, but with reference to the advent of the Logos, Jesus Christ.

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things were made through Him, and without Him nothing was made that was made. (John 1:1-3)

The Greek of John 1:1, *en archai* – ‘in the beginning’ – is exactly the Greek of Genesis 1:1 in the Septuagint. John intends to take his readers’ minds back to the opening act of the universe, and thus to leave us there as we contemplate God’s fulfilling work in the Logos, His Son. The problem with most readers and readings of John 1:1 is that we go back to Genesis and then immediately return to 1st Century Palestine or 21st Century America. John sets up a hermeneutical paradigm with these opening words and he intends that we interpret the rest of his Gospel within that paradigm, a thought framework that has Creation as its primary reference point, and New Creation as its goal. However, it is Paul who most powerfully develops this latter part, the New Creation. Yet even here modern evangelicals tend to read the New Creation in a forward-thinking manner – *inaugurated eschatology* – correct as far as it goes, but not going far enough. The terminology of Creation, like that of Exodus, or Exile, or Temple, is purposely used to draw the readers mind *back* to the historical and redemptive content of the type, even as we also see the present fulfillment and the future promise of the antitype, Jesus Christ and His Church.

The two themes of Temple and Creation come together as many modern scholars are relearning what Jewish scholars have known from time immemorial: that the original Creation was itself a Temple, with God’s image, Man, set within its most holy place,

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Eden. It has long been recognized that the artistic symbolism of the tabernacle in the wilderness and of Solomon's Temple in Jerusalem, were reminiscent of Creation – the imagery drawn directly from the opening chapters of Genesis. G. K. Beale, in his *The Temple and the Church's Mission*, points out that “the Old Testament temple was a microcosm of the entire heaven and earth,”²⁴⁷ a concept



G. K. Beale (b. 1949)

that was well known to Jewish rabbis from well before the time of Jesus Christ and of Paul. This concept is what lies behind the LORD's command to Moses to build the tabernacle after “*the pattern which was shown to you on the Mount.*” The psalmist also sees the connection between tabernacle/Temple and Creation. In the midst of a lengthy psalm essentially recounting redemptive history, Asaph writes, “*And He built His sanctuary like the heights, like the earth which He has established forever.*”²⁴⁸

The understanding of the Creation as a Temple to YHWH is confirmed when we realize that the purpose of a temple was as a residence – a place of rest – for the titular deity. When we read that “*God rested on the seventh day from all His work which He had done,*” we understand not that God was tired and needed a day off, but rather that He took up His abode, *His rest*, in the temple He had just created – the universe. Thus Temple, Creation, and even Sabbath are all tied together in one complex idea of the divine rest and presence in the midst of the work of His hands. Indeed, the prophetic promise of the earth being “*full of the knowledge of the LORD as the waters cover the sea*”²⁴⁹ or of the glory of the LORD filling the earth is nothing less than the earth becoming the Temple of the living God.²⁵⁰ That the Gentiles were always intended within this redemptive glory is evident in Isaiah 60,

²⁴⁷ Beale, G. K. *The Temple and the Church's Mission: A Biblical Theology of the Dwelling Place of God* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press; 2004); 31.

²⁴⁸ Psalm 78:69.

²⁴⁹ Isaiah 11:9

²⁵⁰ *Cp.* Isaiah 6:3; 40:5; 59:19

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*Arise, shine; For your light has come! And the glory of the LORD is risen upon you.
For behold, the darkness shall cover the earth, and deep darkness the people;
But the LORD will arise over you, and His glory will be seen upon you.
The Gentiles shall come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your rising.
Lift up your eyes all around, and see: They all gather together, they come to you;
Your sons shall come from afar, and your daughters shall be nursed at your side.
Then you shall see and become radiant, and your heart shall swell with joy;
Because the abundance of the sea shall be turned to you,
The wealth of the Gentiles shall come to you.
The multitude of camels shall cover your land, the dromedaries of Midian and Ephah;
All those from Sheba shall come; they shall bring gold and incense,
And they shall proclaim the praises of the LORD.
All the flocks of Kedar shall be gathered together to you,
The rams of Nebaioth shall minister to you;
They shall ascend with acceptance on My altar,
And I will glorify the house of My glory.* (Isaiah 60:1-7)

The conjunction of Temple and Creation gains even more significance when we remember the prophecies relating to the relationship of God's holy Temple and the nations, that the latter would *flow to the LORD's house in the latter days*.

*Now it shall come to pass in the latter days that the mountain of the LORD's house
Shall be established on the top of the mountains, and shall be exalted above the hills;
And all nations shall flow to it.
Many people shall come and say, "Come, and let us go up to the mountain of the LORD,
To the house of the God of Jacob; He will teach us His ways, and we shall walk in His paths."
For out of Zion shall go forth the law, and the word of the LORD from Jerusalem.* (Isaiah 2:1-3)

Dispensationalism teaches us to expect the fulfillment of this passage in the Millennium, after the Church has been raptured. The nations that will flow to the LORD's house are not Christians, but millennial pagans bringing tribute and obeisance to Israel's returned God, David's Son the Messiah. The problem with this interpretation is that it runs contrary to the New Testament teaching concerning the Church as the Temple, the body of the risen Lord Jesus Christ. Dispensational literalism prevents its adherents – and also those who have been perhaps subconsciously impacted by it – from seeing *the Church* as the New Temple, and thus the nations flowing toward that Temple

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through the preaching of the Gospel and the Holy Spirit's work of regeneration, adoption, and grafting. The Dispensational view leaves no room for the Pauline usage of Temple terminology and imagery; even if the apostle's references to the Church as the Temple are figurative, if Dispensationalism is true they are a horrible disfiguration.

New Creation and New Temple

Much of recent study into the Creation narrative in the first two chapters of Genesis has come to the realization that in creating the universe, and especially the Garden, God was building for Himself a Temple. The conclusion admittedly flows to a large extent *backward*, from the imagery of the tabernacle/Temple to the elements of the Creation account in Genesis, but there is also evidence within the creation narrative itself, as well as the role of the temple in Ancient Near East societies, to form a strong argument in favor of seeing Eden as the place where God first caused His Name to dwell. One salient feature of any temple is the presence of the image of the deity not only within the temple, but in its most sacred precinct. This is powerfully evident in the Genesis narrative as God place His image, Man, in the most sacred precinct of His Creation temple, the Garden. Indeed, Ezekiel 28 refers to Eden and the primordial sanctuary, though in reference to a prophecy concerning Tyre.

*You were in Eden, the garden of God; every precious stone was your covering:
The sardius, topaz, and diamond, beryl, onyx, and jasper,
Sapphire, turquoise, and emerald with gold.
The workmanship of your timbrels and pipes was prepared for you on the day you were created.
You were the anointed cherub who covers; I established you;
You were on the holy mountain of God; you walked back and forth in the midst of fiery
stones. You were perfect in your ways from the day you were created,
Till iniquity was found in you.
By the abundance of your trading you became filled with violence within,
And you sinned; therefore I cast you as a profane thing
Out of the mountain of God; and I destroyed you, O covering cherub,
From the midst of the fiery stones.
Your heart was lifted up because of your beauty;
You corrupted your wisdom for the sake of your splendor; I cast you to the ground,
I laid you before kings, that they might gaze at you.*

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*You defiled your sanctuaries by the multitude of your iniquities,
By the iniquity of your trading; therefore I brought fire from your midst;
It devoured you, and I turned you to ashes upon the earth in the sight of all who saw you.*
(Ezekiel 28:13-18)

Beale writes, “The cumulative effect of the preceding parallels between the Garden of Genesis 2 and Israel’s tabernacle indicates that Eden was the first archetypal temple, upon which all of Israel’s temples were based. Some of the similarities drawn may not be as strong as others, but when all are viewed together they have a significant collective effect, pointing to Eden as the first temple in garden-like form.”²⁵¹ If, therefore, a close connection exists between Creation and Temple in the original forms of each, it stands to reason that the presence of a New Creation in the Pauline literature must also correspond with a New Temple, the original ‘image’ of Adam being repeated and replaced by the New Image, Jesus Christ, of whom the author of Hebrews writes, “*who being the brightness of His glory and the express image of His person, and upholding all things by the word of His power.*”²⁵² This association between Creation/Garden Temple/Image and New Creation/New Temple/New Man is an evident rubric within Pauline thought, where we frequently encounter the Messiah Jesus as instrumental in the original creation no less than He is in the New Creation.

He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation. For by Him all things were created that are in heaven and that are on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or principalities or powers. All things were created through Him and for Him. And He is before all things, and in Him all things consist. And He is the head of the body, the church, who is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, that in all things He may have the preeminence.
(Colossians 1:15-18)

Perhaps the most striking passage showing the centrality of the Creation theme to Paul is II Corinthians 4:6, where the apostle uses the terminology of the first creative act to fully describe the regenerative act of the Holy Spirit through faith in Jesus Christ.

²⁵¹ Beale; 79-80.

²⁵² Hebrews 1:3

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For it is the God who commanded light to shine out of darkness, who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.

(II Corinthians 4:6)

It is also significant in light of our previous lessons regarding the humanistic philosophy of the post-modern world, that this verse is in the immediate context of Paul's presentation of the Gospel in terms and manner far different from the *"the hidden things of shame, not walking in craftiness nor handling the word of God deceitfully"*²⁵³ The importance of the Creation language to our current discussion, however, is the association of the tabernacle/Temple complex with Creation itself, and the consequent expectation that New Temple terminology will accompany New Creation language. In this expectation we are not disappointed by Paul. Twice in I Corinthians – 3:17 and 6:19 – the apostle uses the explicit reference to the temple – once regarding the corporate body and once the individual believer. Even more significant in terms of this Church in the World study, is the apostle's reference in II Corinthians 6, more clearly focusing in on the role of the temple of God *in the world*.

And what accord has Christ with Belial? Or what part has a believer with an unbeliever? And what agreement has the temple of God with idols? For you are the temple of the living God.

(II Corinthians 6:15-16)

These explicit references to the Church, and to churches and believers, as the Temple of God are joined with an implicit reference to God's building, and Paul as the master builder who, along with Apollos and Cephas (and others, as he credits in his epistolary greetings), are laboring in Christ as builders.

*For we are God's fellow workers; you are God's field, you are **God's building**. According to the grace of God which was given to me, as a wise master builder I have laid the foundation, and another builds on it. But let each one take heed how he builds on it. For no other foundation can anyone lay than that which is laid, which is Jesus Christ. Now if anyone builds on this foundation with gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, straw, each one's work will become clear; for the Day will declare it, because it will be revealed by fire; and the fire will test each one's work, of*

²⁵³ II Corinthians 4:2

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what sort it is. If anyone's work which he has built on it endures, he will receive a reward. If anyone's work is burned, he will suffer loss; but he himself will be saved, yet so as through fire.

(I Corinthians 3:9-15)

The temple imagery continues in Ephesians, where Paul is explicitly discussing the uniting of Jew and Gentile in Christ (*cp.* Eph. 2:11-18). To him this work of reconciliation is nothing less than the building of the true Temple.

Now, therefore, you are no longer strangers and foreigners, but fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, having been built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ Himself being the chief cornerstone, in whom the whole building, being fitted together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord, in whom you also are being built together for a dwelling place of God in the Spirit.

(Ephesians 2:19-22)

In reading these passages, we cannot interpret 'God's building' in I Corinthians 3 as anything other than the Temple, the true Temple, which is the Body of the Lord Jesus Christ, the Church. These Pauline passages echo the words of Peter, whose context is even more clear regarding the Church as the Temple.

*Coming to Him as to a living stone, rejected indeed by men, but chosen by God and precious, you also, as living stones, are being built up **a spiritual house**, a holy priesthood, to offer up spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ. Therefore it is also contained in the Scripture,*

Behold, I lay in Zion a chief cornerstone, elect, precious,

And he who believes on Him will by no means be put to shame.

(I Peter 2:4-6)

Peter's quote regarding the 'chief cornerstone,' a passage from Isaiah 28 that Jesus also used in self-reference, teaches us that the 'cornerstone' was not for some arbitrary building or a defensive wall about the city, but was in reference to the true Temple, the one that He would build in three days. This language is at the heart of the identity of the Church *in the world*, as in the ancient world the deity's temple was the place of connection between the deity and the world. This language, spoken by Jews among Jews, was also incredibly incendiary, controversial in a way that pagan Gentiles would somewhat understand but modern folk – believers and unbelievers alike – generally fail to grasp. When Jews heard Jesus speak of rebuilding the temple in Jerusalem in three

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days, they were scandalized, and one of the charges leveled against Him in the Sanhedrin was that He was plotting to destroy the Temple.²⁵⁴ For Paul to say that the Church was the Temple, that believers were the Temple, was beyond radical, it was the proclamation that the Messianic Age had come – and most of his fellow countrymen thoroughly rejected his claim. Yet we must allow the controversial nature of Paul's temple terminology to regain its force if we are to properly understand the Church of which he spoke both in its own identity and its role in the world.

When it comes to the Temple itself...the epicentre of the Jewish world, even the Diaspora world, the one place where the living God had chosen to put his name and reveal his glory, the place to which the nations would flock to see that glory and learn that name – the magnitude of Paul's transformed symbolic world becomes at once apparent. *You are the temple of the living God.*²⁵⁵

We should also note from the passage in I Corinthians 3, that Paul refers to the Church not only as *God's building*, but also *God's field*. Although he is not using the exact terminology of Genesis 2, the overall temple imagery that he does use – and the explicit reference to the temple later in the chapter – argue strongly in favor of a *garden* allusion, a *garden-temple*; in other words, *Eden*.

The LORD God planted a garden eastward in Eden, and there He put the man whom He had formed. And out of the ground the LORD God made every tree grow that is pleasant to the sight and good for food. The tree of life was also in the midst of the garden, and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil... Then the LORD God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to tend and keep it. (Genesis 2:8-9, 15)

It has often been noted that the Hebrew phrase *tend and keep* in Genesis 2:15 is also used of the tabernacle service of the Levitical priests, signifying that Adam's role was priestly, as a 'fellow worker' in God's field, so to speak. Thus what may seem to be a sudden switch in metaphors – *God's field...God's building...* is actually a lynchpin in the thought world of the apostle: *New Creation = God's Field; New Temple = God's Building.*

²⁵⁴ Cp. Matthew 26:61

²⁵⁵ Wright, *Paul and the Faithfulness of God*; 355. Italics original.

Beale comments, “Is this one of Paul’s purportedly strange, sudden metaphorical shifts? What does a ‘cultivated field’ have to do with a ‘building’? Upon closer analysis...Paul is not speaking of a generic ‘building’ but of the temple as a ‘building’. If so, the shift from the agricultural metaphor of a ‘cultivated field’ or ‘vineyard’ to a temple may be viewed to be more natural in the light of our prior study in the Old Testament and Gospels. There we discovered that the Garden of Eden, Israel’s garden-like promised land, and Israel’s future restoration in a garden-like land were either equated or associated with a temple.”²⁵⁶ Paul’s language of the garden-temple echoes Psalm 92:12-13, where we read, “*The righteous man will flourish like the palm tree, he will grow like the cedar in Lebanon. Planted in the house of the LORD, they will flourish in the courts of our God.*”

Even the reference by Paul to the building materials in I Corinthians 3 confirms this temple association. Note the parallel between the ‘good’ building materials that he, and Apollos, and any ‘builder’ who hopes for divine approbation uses, with the materials that David secured for the building of the Temple in Jerusalem.

I Corinthians 3:12-13

Now if anyone builds on this foundation with gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, straw, each one’s work will become clear; for the Day will declare it, because it will be revealed by fire; and the fire will test each one’s work, of what sort it is.

I Chronicles 29:2

Now for the house of my God I have prepared with all my might: gold for things to be made of gold, silver for things of silver, bronze for things of bronze, iron for things of iron, wood for things of wood, onyx stones, stones to be set, glistening stones of various colors, all kinds of precious stones, and marble slabs in abundance.

To be sure, the parallel is not exact: in Paul’s list wood is classified with the poor building materials that will be consumed by the testing fire. Still, his terminology is sufficient for any reader familiar with the chronicles of ancient Israel to hear David’s voice echoing in Paul’s words. Consider also Paul’s self-reference as a “*wise master builder*” in I Corinthians 3:10, a skill granted only by divine grace. This echoes Moses’ words in Exodus 35, in which the same Greek word *architektōn* is used of Bezalel as Paul uses of himself.

²⁵⁶ Beale; 246.

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And Moses said to the children of Israel, "See, the LORD has called by name Bezalel the son of Uri, the son of Hur, of the tribe of Judah; and He has filled him with the Spirit of God, in wisdom and understanding, in knowledge and all manner of workmanship, to design artistic works, to work in gold and silver and bronze, in cutting jewels for setting, in carving wood, and to work in all manner of artistic workmanship. (Exodus 35:30-33)

Hopefully these passages are sufficient to remind us how central the themes of Creation and Temple were to the apostle in his consideration of the identity and purpose of the Church. To him the issue was not metaphorical, but eschatological. All that Creation and the tabernacle/Temple complex in ancient Judaism foreshadowed had been fulfilled completely in Jesus Christ. Thus if the Church is the Body of Christ, it is therefore the true Temple of the living God. "Jesus himself has become the place where, and the means by which, heaven and earth are brought together, so that the Pentecost-scene in Acts 2 takes the long-awaited place of a second-Temple scene in which Israel's God comes back at last to live with and among his people."²⁵⁷ Timothy Wardle, Chair of the Religion Department at Furman University, notes the distinct (and unmistakable) terminology the New Testament uses in associating the early believing community with the temple. He writes,

In speaking of the church as a temple, early Christian texts consistently use the word *naos*, as opposed to *hieron*. Traditionally, *naos* described the place where the deity dwelt, the temple proper, while *hieron* is a more elastic term that encapsulates the temple precincts as well as the sanctuary itself...In describing themselves as the *naos* of God, the early Christians were claiming that their community now served as the distinct dwelling place of the God of Israel.²⁵⁸

We will return to the concept of the Temple as the nexus between heaven and earth. It is, however, necessary to revisit the earlier discussion on Dispensationalism, to show how, against the New Testament evidence – not least the *Pauline* evidence – the putting-off of the 'true' Temple to a literal building in Jerusalem during the Millennium does incredible damage to one's understanding of Paul as well as one's understanding

²⁵⁷ Wright, *PGF*; 356.

²⁵⁸ Wardle, Timothy *The Jerusalem Temple and Early Christian Identity* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck; 2010); 207.

of the Church. One may disagree with the eschatology of Dispensationalism; that is really neither here nor there. But the ecclesiology of Dispensationalism is diametrically opposed to that of Paul; it is error verging on heresy. The Temple is not to be sought after in the future – indeed, there is no Temple in the New Jerusalem.²⁵⁹ Jesus is building His Temple now, by the Holy Spirit and in the Church.

Heaven and Earth Nexus

What does all of this have to do with the Church in the World? Most evangelicals, if they think at all about the Church as the Temple, think only in terms of the place where they go to worship God. We often call the assembly room the ‘sanctuary’ in reference to the temple imagery we read in the Bible. Evangelicals know of Jesus’ claim that He would rebuild the Temple in three days, but usually fail to think beyond the three days in the tomb and the glorious resurrection. Even John’s further explanation that Jesus was referring to His body is rarely connected in any deep, meaningful way with Paul’s many references to the Church as the Body of Christ. Even his own references to the Church as the Temple are misinterpreted. For instance, many a sermon has been preached against smoking and drinking based on Paul’s words, “*if anyone defiles the temple of God, God will destroy him.*” Never mind the fact that the context in which we find this verse has to do quite clearly with the *corporate* church, and the ministry of those who purport to be ‘builders.’²⁶⁰ Unlike the contemporary Qumran community which viewed itself as the ‘true temple’ in explicit rejection of the current Temple in Jerusalem and its corrupt priesthood, Paul’s usage of temple terminology is not relative, it is not compared to the existing Levitical priesthood and sacrificial system. For Paul, the Church stands at the true temple on its own right, by virtue of the presence of the Holy Spirit in her midst. Wardle writes, “Paul’s transference of temple language to the community does not seem to be based on any denigration of the Jerusalem temple or its priests, or on a highly developed notion of expiation or atonement with the community.

²⁵⁹ “*But I saw no temple in it, for the Lord God Almighty and the Lamb are its temple.*” Revelation 21:22

²⁶⁰ This is not to say that Paul was ambivalent as to how believers treat their bodies, but that is the context of the temple terminology in I Corinthians 6, and the issue is fornication, not smoking.

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Rather, at the theological center of Paul’s use of this terminology is the belief that the Holy Spirit now resides in the midst of the community in the same way that the presence of God was understood to dwell in the Jerusalem temple.”²⁶¹

It should be clear from the above analysis that temple terminology was significant to the New Testament writers as it was to Jesus himself. The significance is far greater than just a building in which to gather and worship; the tabernacle in the wilderness and the Temple in Jerusalem were far more than just convenient places to meet. Temples in the ancient world, and no less for Israel than for her neighbors, were the places where the deity rested, where the deity lived in the midst of his



John Walton (b. 1952)

or her worshipers, and where mankind connected with the deity. John Walton, who makes interesting observations and poor conclusions in his *Lost World of Genesis One*, writes, “The role of the temple in the ancient world is not primarily a place for people to gather in worship like modern churches. It is a place for the deity – sacred space. It is his home, but more importantly his headquarters – the control room. When the deity rests in the temple it means that he is taking command, that he is mounting to his throne to assume his rightful place and his proper role.”²⁶² When in the Old Testament we read of Yahweh dwelling in the midst of His people, we understand it to be within the tabernacle or the Temple; each in its time was the place where God connected with His people and vice versa. When Solomon’s Temple was destroyed, and despite the rebuilding of the temple in Jerusalem after the Exile, the glory of the LORD had departed and had not yet returned – *God was not dwelling in the midst of His people anymore.*

Second Temple Judaism held out hope – or at least some did – that Yahweh would return to His temple, the hope promised in the final prophecy of the Old Covenant, Malachi.

²⁶¹ Wardle; 211.

²⁶² Walton, John H. *The Lost World of Genesis One* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press; 2009); 74.

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*Behold, I send My messenger, and he will prepare the way before Me.
And the Lord, whom you seek, will suddenly come to His temple,
Even the Messenger of the covenant, in whom you delight.
Behold, He is coming, Says the LORD of hosts.*

(Malachi 3:11)

Rabbinic literature viewed the Temple as the ‘gateway’ to heaven, much as Eden was before Adam’s fall, and further typified by Jacob’s Ladder. Reaching up into heaven was the motivation for the building of the Tower of Babel, and mountains have always been particularly sacred within the ancient religions. Mt. Zion, where the Temple sat, was referred to as the ‘navel of the earth’ in the Book of Jubilees.

And Noah rejoiced that this portion came forth for Shem and for his sons, and he remembered all that he had spoken with his mouth in prophecy; for he had said: 'Blessed be the Lord God of Shem And may the Lord dwell in the dwelling of Shem.' And he knew that the Garden of Eden is the holy of holies, and the dwelling of the Lord, and Mount Sinai the centre of the desert, and Mount Zion -the centre of the navel of the earth: these three were created as holy places facing each other.²⁶³

Jon Levenson, in his article “The Temple and the World,” investigates the Second



Jon Levenson (b. 1949)

Temple Jewish attitude toward the Temple, including an analysis of the Qumran Community, which rejected the ‘Second’ Temple as illegitimate, and such important 1st Century Jewish voices as Philo of Alexandria and Josephus. It is evident that the vast majority of Second Temple Judaism considered the nexus between Creation and Temple to be firmly established in the Scriptures, with even the rejectionist Qumran Community still looking forward to a

restored, or at least a cleansed, Temple. Levenson quotes from the Mishnah *Yoma*, “‘The Holy One created the world like an embryo. As the embryo proceeds from the navel onwards, so God began to create the world from its navel onwards and from there is spread out in different directions.’ And lest there be any doubt as to where precisely the

²⁶³ Jubilees 8:18-19. [Jubilees 8 \(pseudepigrapha.com\)](http://pseudepigrapha.com). Accessed 20September2023.

rabbis located the navel of the world: ‘The World was created from Zion.’”²⁶⁴ The rabbis concluded from their study of the Hebrew Scriptures, that Creation and the Temple were so closely linked that the location of the Temple – Zion – must also be the epicenter of Creation. “In short, the Temple is a visible, tangible token of the act of creation, the point of origin of the world, the ‘focus’ of the universe.”²⁶⁵

Thus it can be firmly established that the Jewish mind of Paul’s day considered the Temple and God’s Creation – the universe – as inseparably linked acts and symbols of Yahweh’s overall work and purpose. “The Temple thus formed in principle the heart of Judaism, in the full metaphorical sense: it was the organ from which there went out to the body of Judaism, in Palestine and in the Diaspora, the living and healing presence of the covenant god.”²⁶⁶ Restoration or cleansing of the Temple was seen from the Hebrew Scriptures to be a distinctly *messianic* work, alongside the restoration of both Israel and the subjection of all the nations to Yahweh in Jerusalem (at the Temple). Thus Levenson notes, “Perhaps it is not coincidence that the Hebrew Bible begins with an account of the creation of heaven and earth by the command of God (Gen. 1:1) and ends with the command of the God of heaven ‘to build him a Temple in Jerusalem’ (2 Chron. 36:23). It goes from creation (Temple) to Temple (creation) in twenty-four books.”²⁶⁷

But even within the Jewish mind there existed a conundrum, expressed in various places in the Old Testament. Basically, the tension between God’s transcendence and His immanence is expressed in the rhetorical question as to how the God who fills the heavens can dwell in a building made by man. Solomon expresses this mystery in his dedication of the First Temple.

But will God indeed dwell on the earth? Behold, heaven and the heaven of heavens cannot contain You. How much less this temple which I have built!
(I Kings 8:27)

²⁶⁴ Levenson, Jon D. “The Temple and the World” *The Journal of Religion*, July 1984, Vol. 64, No. 3; 283.

²⁶⁵ *Idem*.

²⁶⁶ Wright, N. T. *The New Testament and the People of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press; 1992); 226. *Note: Wright explains his usage of the lowercase ‘g’ for God on page xiv of this first volume of his Christian Origins and the Question of God series.*

²⁶⁷ *Ibid.*; 295. The Hebrew Bible ends with the Books of Chronicles, not the prophecy of Malachi as the Christian Old Testament ends.

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God Himself answers this query through the prophet Isaiah (years later, of course):

Thus says the LORD:

“Heaven is My throne, and earth is My footstool.

Where is the house that you will build Me? And where is the place of My rest?

For all those things My hand has made, and all those things exist,” Says the LORD.

(Isaiah 66:1-2a)²⁶⁸

Solomon’s question and the LORD’s answer must not be seen as a divine rejection of the Temple – that God would not dwell in the house that Solomon had built. We know that He *did* inhabit the Temple in Jerusalem in the same manner as He inhabited the tabernacle in the wilderness: the presence of the *Shekinah*. The point of passages such as these two is that God has already built His Temple – “*the heavens and the earth*” – and chooses to dwell among His people in a physical place – be it the tabernacle or the Temple – as a symbol and promise, reminding them of His covenant commitment to *dwell in the midst* of His people. When the glory is seen filling the Temple, either historically as in the tabernacle and Solomon’s Temple, or prophetically in Isaiah 6, this event is typological of “*the glory of the LORD filling the earth as the waters cover the sea.*” Thus Levenson concludes, “YHWH has already built his Temple, which is the world, ‘heaven’ and ‘earth’...The world in its fullness is the Temple.”²⁶⁹

But now, as Paul repeatedly informs us, God is building a New Temple made neither by human hands nor of physical building materials, but of believers: Peter’s ‘living stones.’ That the New Creation would have a New Temple should have been obvious by extrapolation from the Old Testament, and Paul’s frequent references to the Church as the Temple must not be seen as mere metaphor but as integrally connected to his teaching on the New Creation. God has inaugurated the New Creation in the risen Jesus Christ; He has likewise initiated the rebuilding of the true Temple in which He will dwell in the midst of His people. So closely connected are Creation and the Temple in the Jewish mind, that it would be impossible for the apostle consider the advent and

²⁶⁸ This is at the close of Isaiah’s prophecy, a section that is interpretively governed by the New Heaven and New Earth of Isaiah 65:17.

²⁶⁹ Levenson; 296.

inauguration of the New Creation without the associated New Temple. Paul did not invent the idea; he inherited the truth from the Lord Himself, who considered prophetically that His own risen Body would be the New Temple.²⁷⁰

The crux of all this is that the prophecies concerning the Messianic Age – prophecies that we now know have been fulfilled in Jesus Christ – include both the New Creation and a New Temple. This New Temple is the dwelling place of God through His Holy Spirit, and it is the center of the moral universe, as Levenson notes, “The Temple is the moral center of the universe, the source from which holiness and a terrifying justice radiate.”²⁷¹ The message of salvation radiates out from the New Temple, and the nations, in the persons of the elect from every tongue, tribe and nation, return to the New Temple, as Isaiah prophesied.

*The word that Isaiah the son of Amoz saw concerning Judah and Jerusalem.
Now it shall come to pass in the latter days that the mountain of the LORD's house
Shall be established on the top of the mountains, and shall be exalted above the hills;
And all nations shall flow to it. Many people shall come and say,
“Come, and let us go up to the mountain of the LORD, to the house of the God of Jacob;
He will teach us His ways, and we shall walk in His paths.”
For out of Zion shall go forth the law, and the word of the LORD from Jerusalem.
He shall judge between the nations, and rebuke many people;
They shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks;
Nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war anymore.*

(Isaiah 2:1-4)

In response to the influence of Dispensationalism pushing the fulfillment of this prophecy off into a distant, millennial future, believers should see prophecies like this one as the framework around which Paul reoriented the hope of Israel around the now-fulfilled covenant promise in the person of the risen Lord Jesus. Paul's frequent reference to the Spirit dwelling in both believers and the Church “can only mean – must only mean – some kind of identification of the divine spirit with the long-awaited returning Shekinah. For the divine spirit to take up residence in the church is for Exodus 40 and

²⁷⁰ Cp. John 2:19-21

²⁷¹ Levenson; 298.

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Ezekiel 43 to find a radical, unexpected and even shocking new fulfilment. But there can be no doubt that this is what Paul meant to say.²⁷² The apostle knows the Church to be the New Temple, and the in-gathering, the 'grafting in,' of the Gentiles therefore constitutes the nations flowing to that New Temple, the Body of Christ, the Church. Speaking of the new unity between Jew and Gentile in Christ Jesus, Paul cannot help but set the matter in the terminology of the temple.

For He Himself is our peace, who has made both one, and has broken down the middle wall of separation, having abolished in His flesh the enmity, that is, the law of commandments contained in ordinances, so as to create in Himself one new man from the two, thus making peace, and that He might reconcile them both to God in one body through the cross, thereby putting to death the enmity. And He came and preached peace to you who were afar off and to those who were near. For through Him we both have access by one Spirit to the Father. Now, therefore, you are no longer strangers and foreigners, but fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, having been built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ Himself being the chief cornerstone, in whom the whole building, being fitted together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord, in whom you also are being built together for a dwelling place of God in the Spirit.

(Ephesians 2:14-22)

This is the ultimate meaning of Jesus' enigmatic words, "If I be lifted up, I will draw all men unto Me." That He is now doing through the Gospel, by the Holy Spirit, and to the New Temple, the Church.

²⁷² Wright, *PGF*; 712.

Lesson 11 – Prophetic Presence
Text: Romans 1:15-32; II Corinthians 2:15-17

*“But the Christian faith,
as a prophetic religion,
is either a way of life or a parody of itself.”*
(Miroslav Volf)

Contemporary evangelical literature is full of diagnoses – it seems that there is no lack of recognition that 21st Century Evangelicalism, and by extension the 21st Century Church, is in trouble. There is a fair amount of consensus that the philosophical shift initiated by the Enlightenment and culminating – at least for now – in our post-modern, neo-pagan, post-truth, post-Constantinianism, etc., Western society, has placed the Church and the preaching and living of the gospel in waters uncharted since the first three Christian centuries. Many of the titles of books cited in this study – from Newbig-



Miroslav Volf (b. 1956)

in's *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society* to Hunter's *To Change the World* to Wells' *No Place for Truth* – indicate the common diagnosis. But those that attempt to offer a solution – *The Church as Counterculture*, for instance, or Miroslav Volf's *A Public Faith*, move from a sound diagnosis to a deadly remedy. Volf offers an insightful analysis of the nature of biblical Christianity but then moves off into a nebulous discussion on Human Flourishing, revealing a subtle universalism that he couches carefully in Christian language: “Will God in fact exclude some human beings in the end? Not necessarily...Will some people refuse? I hope not – and the Bible along with the best of the Christian tradition has never affirmed with certainty that some will refuse and therefore be excluded.”²⁷³ Rodney Clapp, whose analysis of neo-liberalism forms another aspect of accurate diagnosis regarding the sickness of modern, Western evangelicalism, finds the need to insert his conclusion that Paul's elimination of the “absolute, binary distinction between male and female” – and the reader probably

²⁷³ Volf, Miroslav *A Public Faith* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press; 2011); 50.

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knows where this is headed – fully justifies and sanctifies same-sex relationships, so long as the partners are “committed to each other’s welfare.”²⁷⁴ Others, like Paul Dinolfo, recognizing that “Christianity is no longer the primary organizing principle that shapes the lives of most Christians,”²⁷⁵ advocates ecumenical ‘covenant communities’ separate from individual churches. Dinolfo’s ‘practical approach’ is less brazen than Wolf’s or Clapp’s, but its subtlety is perhaps more dangerous. Using the word ‘covenant,’ he paints his solution in biblical terminology, but with so little biblical doctrine that his ‘covenant communities’ are, it would seem, happy places for Protestants, Eastern Orthodox, and Roman Catholics to unite, while still remaining ‘faithful members’ of their denominational churches.

Believers concerned about the state of evangelicalism in the 21st Century must be very careful in what they read. Solutions range from the more extreme accommodation of modern social evils (same-sex marriage) and ageless heresies (universalism) on the one hand, to renewed calls for the ‘nuclear family’ as the ‘true church.’ Christians, it is said by the ultra-conservative wing of evangelicalism, need to retreat from the wickedness of the modern, urban world and regroup into familial communes, living off the land and raising large families. This approach has a certain ‘Little House on the Prairie’ cleanliness and wholesomeness to it, and has attracted many to the Christian Reconstructionism of theologians like Doug Wilson. Each of these paths, whether liberal or conservative, is a departure from biblical – and especially Pauline – Ecclesiology. Each path can be characterized by one of Niebuhr’s paradigms, or a blend of several, and are therefore each a self-conscious attempt to square the circle of the Church and Culture.



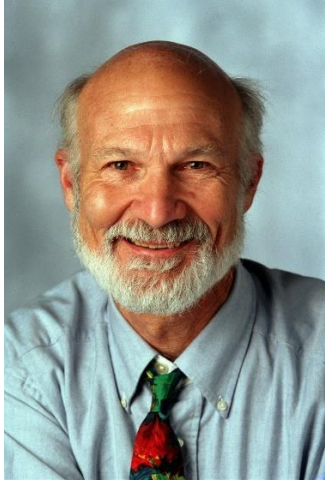
Doug Wilson (b. 1953)

²⁷⁴ Clapp, *Naming Neoliberalism*; 104-105.

²⁷⁵ Dinolfo, Paul “Covenant Community: A Practical Approach to the Renewal of the Church” in *Confident Witness – Changing World*; Craig Van Gelder, ed.; 261.

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Like the modern medical community that may be able to consistently and accurately diagnose a serious illness but then cannot agree on the proper course of cure, so these modern evangelical writers offer widely divergent ‘cures’ to the problem of the Church in the 21st Century. One of the strongest voices in this regard over the past forty



Stanley Hauerwas (b. 1940)

years is Stanley Hauerwas, emeritus professor at Duke University Divinity School and perhaps one of the most famous contemporary neo-anabaptists in the world. Hauerwas, along with William Willimon, published the ground-breaking *Resident Aliens* in 1989 with the expanded 25th Anniversary Edition coming out in 2014. This book was one of the first to challenge the Niebuhrian system of Church/Culture relations, advocating what may reasonably be termed a ‘militant withdrawal’ of the Church from the world. The authors do not use

this phrase themselves, but Hauerwas’ later essay titled “The Nonviolent Terrorist: In Defense of Christian Fanaticism” seems to justify the description of their perspective. Indeed, ‘Resident Aliens’ is an oxymoronic way of saying that the Church, and individual believers, remain active (Resident) in the midst of a world to which they do not belong (Aliens). Recognizing, as the other diagnosticians have recognized, that the modern, Western world is not what it was even a hundred years ago, Hauerwas and Willimon write, “That we *are* saying is that in the twilight of that world, we have an opportunity to discover what has and always is the case – that the church, as those called out by God, embodies a social alternative that the world cannot on its own terms know.”²⁷⁶

Hauerwas and Willimon take their diagnosis a step further than most in that they recognize that most contemporary evangelicals are analyzing the situation from the perspective of the world and not of the Bible. It is argued by many current evangelical writers that the post-modern person just is not capable of believing the way people were before the Enlightenment. Stuck with a pre-scientific heritage, the Church – or so

²⁷⁶ Hauerwas, Stanley & William H. Willimon *Resident Aliens* (Nashville: Abingdon Press; 2014); 17-18.

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the argument goes – now finds its message ridiculed and ignored in society, and needs to revamp and repackage the gospel to make it more acceptable to the modern audience.

Christians, our theologians told us, are in the rather embarrassing position of having a faith rooted in ancient, parochial, Near Eastern writings, which present the life of an ancient, parochial, Near Eastern Jew named Jesus. Modern Christians stare at the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus across what the German philosopher Lessing called the ‘ugly wide ditch’ of history. Copernicus, despite the church’s efforts to silence him, finally convinced us that the sun did not go around the earth, and everything changed. The Copernican Revolution was the first, we were led to believe, seismic shift for the church. Everyone’s world view had shifted to something called ‘the modern world view.’ The poor old church, however, was stuck with the legacy of a ‘pre-scientific (i.e., premodern) world view.’²⁷⁷

The main conclusion, then, among modern evangelicals, is that the church needs to revise the message to accommodate the modern mind, getting rid of the miraculous and the ‘unscientific’ while retaining, it is argued, the ‘essence’ of the Christian message. This ‘essence,’ always seems to boil down to ‘love.’ But the one common denominator among most modern analysts of the evangelical problem, as Hauerwas and Willimon note, is that the church is



William Willimon (b. 1946)

now taking its song sheet from the world. “When the modern pastor stands up to preach to a modern congregation, the pastor is the bridge that links the old world of scripture to the new world of modern people. In our view, the traffic has tended to move in one direction on that interpretive bridge. Modern interpreters of the faith have tended to let the ‘modern world’ determine the questions and therefore limit the answer.”²⁷⁸

The irony of the modern view that the church’s message is too archaic and unscientific for modern human beings to accept, is that it was, at least, too unscientific for an-

²⁷⁷ *Resident Aliens*; 19.

²⁷⁸ *Ibid.*; 20.

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cient people to accept! Modern folk seem to think that the ancients were unaware that dead people stay dead and do not rise again from their graves. But modern science did not discover that medical fact; the ancients were just as aware of it as we are. A crucified Messiah was a stumbling block to the Jews, but a dead Messiah who has come back to life was foolishness to the rest of the world, as Paul acknowledges.

For Jews request a sign, and Greeks seek after wisdom; but we preach Christ crucified, to the Jews a stumbling block and to the Greeks foolishness, but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. Because the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men. (I Corinthians 1:22-25)

Further irony is found in the perennial fact that the unbelieving community surrounding the church often has a better idea of what the church is supposed to be in its midst than does the church herself. When the Christian witness is watered down or modified to be more 'relevant,' it becomes so much like the world's own 'message' that there remains no distinction – and often it is the unbeliever who first notices this phenomenon. Newbigin writes, "Our problem is not that the gospel appears as something foreign to our culture; it is that it has become so totally domesticated within our culture that its power to exercise a radically critical function is in question."²⁷⁹ Contemporary evangelicals long to have a voice once again, as the Church did during the Constantinian Era, but that voice is more often than not a different one than Paul's and thus a different one than that of the Holy Spirit. Again, the irony: the contemporary Church speaks the language of contemporary culture with such fluency, that her message is lost in the noise of competing voices in our frenetic, post-modern culture. "It has often been said that the failure of Western churches is...irrelevance, failure to make contact. I want to suggest, on the contrary...that the Christian churches of the West have been so co-opted into our culture that we have lost the power to challenge it."²⁸⁰

Within conservative, and especially Reformed, churches the solution is to double-down on doctrine and to circle the wagons against heresy by reinvigorating the con-

²⁷⁹ *Signs*; 89.

²⁸⁰ *Ibid.*; 90.

fessionalism of a past age. Reacting against the watering down of doctrine, conservative churches and denominations now advocate ‘confessionalism,’ whereby sound doctrine is hedged about by the creeds of the past. Since whole denominations and even individual churches are generally not willing to place further obstacles to relevancy, these attempts to re-establish purity of doctrine are usually parachurch in nature, and sometimes even ecumenical. On the conservative side there are such new allegiances as the Alliance of Confessing Evangelicals, the Gospel Coalition, and the Council on Biblical Inerrancy. It may be significant that the impetus for the formation of these organizations and ‘alliances’ has often come not from churches but from Christian academia, the founders of the organizations are predominantly seminary professors and scholarly authors rather than pastors. This is, of course, a broadly general statement as some well-known evangelical pastors such as James Montgomery Boice and Tim Keller have been involved in such organizations; it is not entirely an academic exercise though it is predominantly so.

Sound doctrine is critical, on that there should be no argument. Paul warns Timothy that *“the Spirit explicitly says that in later times some will fall away from the faith, paying attention to deceitful spirits and doctrines of demons.”*²⁸¹ On account of this danger, Timothy is admonished,

Till I come, give attention to reading, to exhortation, to doctrine. Do not neglect the gift that is in you, which was given to you by prophecy with the laying on of the hands of the eldership. Meditate on these things; give yourself entirely to them, that your progress may be evident to all. Take heed to yourself and to the doctrine. Continue in them, for in doing this you will save both yourself and those who hear you. (I Timothy 4:13-16)

It must be acknowledged that contemporary attempts to re-establish doctrinal orthodoxy within evangelicalism are at least commendable in light of the wholesale abandonment of the ancient faith by mainline denominations within Protestantism. Even Reformed denominations and churches have largely accommodated the Gospel message to the post-modern setting, most recently adopting ‘wokeness’ in further and

²⁸¹ I Timothy 4:1

futile attempts to remain ‘relevant.’ The Alliance of Confessing Evangelicals self-consciously seeks to “foster a Reformed awakening in today's Church” by forming “a coalition of believers who hold the historic creeds and confessions of the Reformed faith and proclaim biblical doctrine.”²⁸² The primary method that such organizations have employed is the provision of materials intended to help the local churches maintain or recover sound, biblical doctrine, and no doubt this material has proved useful in many instances. But this approach can only hope to be successful if the current problem facing Western evangelicalism is doctrinal in scope and cause. Did modern evangelicalism relinquish its public voice due to its having abandoned sound doctrine? Or is it rather the case that sound doctrine was itself abandoned because the churches were losing their public voice? Somewhat of a chicken-and-egg problem, but it seems that most modern evangelical diagnosticians have concluded the second of the two causal relationships: the abandonment of doctrine was more the cause than the effect of ecclesiastical modernization.

So while retaining or recovering sound doctrine is necessary, it is not sufficient to arrest or reverse the fading influence of the Church in the Western world. Indeed, confessionalism is largely a contemporary form of the ‘abandonment’ or ‘isolationist’ paradigm among Niebuhr’s five. Considering all that we have discussed regarding post-modernism, post-truth, and post-Constantinianism, it is hard to imagine how a closer adherence to creeds and confessions of the past would endear the modern Church to outsiders. Such acceptance, of course, is not the goal of confessional churches, nor should it be the goal of any church. This is merely to say that confessionalism, whatever its merits may be toward greater doctrinal purity within the Church, is a form of isolationism; it is really just another manifestation of one of Niebuhr’s paradigms. Purity of doctrine, or practice, or both has always been at the heart of pietism, cloisterism, and monasticism; confessionalism is cut from the same cloth.

Again, it must be firmly understood that sound doctrine is vital to the life of the Church, and the vital witness of any believing community. It is a matter of debate

²⁸² [What Is the Alliance | Alliance of Confessing Evangelicals \(alliancenet.org\)](https://alliancenet.org/). Accessed 26September2023.

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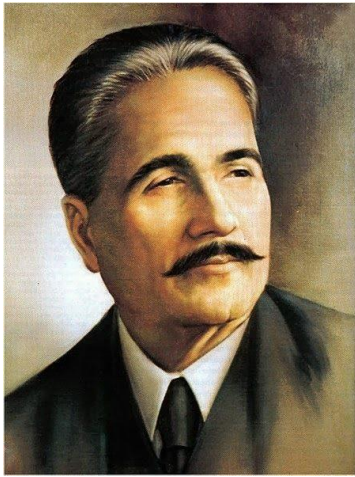
whether confessionalism will successfully restore sound doctrine to the churches, but that is not the issue of this particular study. The concern is whether confessionalism, the latest, conservative edition of isolationism, is the answer to the overall question as to the relationship of the Church in the World. Considering Jesus' own interaction with the Pharisees, the 'confessionalists' of Second Temple Judaism, it is hard to conclude that dotting one's Is and crossing one's Ts more exactly is the solution to the diminution of the Church's influence in the modern world.

But just as there is indispensable value in recovering solid, biblical doctrine in the churches, there is also the reality that the problem facing contemporary evangelicalism is, so to speak, *doctrinal*. But it has been the basic framework of this study that the branch of study most impacted by modern, Western culture, is not Christology or Soteriology or Eschatology – though each of these has been massively impacted by Enlightenment philosophy as well as by Industrialization and its associated Urbanization. In terms of the Church's relationship vis-à-vis the world, the major branch of study that needs restoration is *Ecclesiology*, the doctrine of the Church herself.

Prophetic Religion vs. Mystical Religion

In spite of Volf's incorrect prescription for the ailing Western Church, his diagnosis of the modern predicament is both unique and insightful. In his book, *A Public Faith*, Volf writes about the 'malfunction of faith' due to several causes. It is his analysis of the nature of the Christian faith, and hence the purpose of the Church in the World, that is perhaps the most valuable contribution of the book. In the first chapter of his book, Volf sets forth the distinction between *prophetic* and *mystic* religions, noting significantly that Christianity is a *prophetic* religion. The mystic religion encourages escapism, an attaining of what the medieval scholars called the 'Beatific Vision' without a subsequent return to the humdrum, mundane life of the world. Hinduism is a mystic religion; Christianity has too often become one. Monasticism and pietism, as well as contemporary individualism, all emphasize the individual's achievement of a mystical ex-

perience – Higher Life, Second Blessing, call it what you will. Volf quotes from a 20th Century Islamic work (and Islam as well as Judaism have both their prophetic and their



Muhammad Iqbal (1877-1938)

mystical segments), *The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam* by Muhammad Iqbal, “The mystic does not wish to return from the repose of ‘unitary experience’; and even when he does return as he must, his return does not mean much for mankind at large.”²⁸³ Volf points out that the mystic is constantly seeking to ‘ascend’ to God and, hopefully, remain in the ecstatic condition of the divine presence. The prophet, on the other hand, not only knows he must return to the world of men, but desires to do so because he has a

message from the Lord, he has a desire to both see that message delivered and to see his fellow man live in obedience to what he has heard from God ‘on the mount.’ The mystic religion does not care for the unbelieving world (or even much of the un-mystical believing world); it is esoteric and self-absorbed. The prophetic religion cannot help but be concerned for the world around him, as he knows that it matters to the God for whom he seeks to speak. “Prophetic religions aim to transform the world in God’s name rather than to flee from the world into God’s arms as do mystical religions.”²⁸⁴ Christianity has had, and continues to have, strong mystical strains within it, but at its core it is, as Judaism was before it, a *prophetic* religion. Volf writes, “But the Christian religion, as a prophetic religion, is either a way of life or a parody of itself.”²⁸⁵

Volf’s description of the prophetic religion is also enlightening. He speaks of *ascent* and *return*: the ascent to God and the return to the world. This sounds like mystical religion, and indeed the ascent portion is the hallmark of mystical religions. But Volf points out that it is the *return* that makes all the difference, though he does note that a return without an *ascent* is little more than a personality cult, a tragic characteristic of much that passes for evangelical Christianity in our day. One must look past Volf’s

²⁸³ Volf; 6.

²⁸⁴ *Ibid.*; 7.

²⁸⁵ *Ibid.*; 16.

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ecumenical passion in order to ‘extract the precious from the vile,’ as he speaks of Moses, Jesus, and Mohammad in the same sentence. He, like so many contemporary evangelicals, loses sight of “*the truth as it is in Jesus Christ*” in his attempt to reverse the negative trajectory of 21st Century evangelicalism.

Yet his discussion of *ascent* and *return* bears consideration. The ascent is that process whereby the believer, and especially the church leader, receives wisdom from God through His Word and by His Spirit. The picture we have seen in the last lesson concerning the Church as the true Temple reminds us of the age-old tradition among religions, that the presence of the deity was to be sought on the ‘high places,’ just as the Temple in Jerusalem was built on and prophetically associated with Mt. Zion. Volf is speaking metaphorically of *ascent*, and we can reasonably apply it to the believer’s study and devotion, his or her deep digging into God’s word or, as Paul puts it in his first letter to Timothy, “*Take pains with these things; be absorbed in them, so that your progress may be evident to all*”²⁸⁶ In the second letter, Paul again exhorts his son in the faith: “*Be diligent to present yourself approved to God as a workman who does not need to be ashamed, handling accurately the word of truth.*”²⁸⁷

This ‘taking pains’ and diligence constitutes the ascent of the believer to hear the truth of God in Jesus Christ through His Word read and studied, meditated upon and compared with and within itself. Volf writes, “*The ascent is the receptive moment.*”²⁸⁸ It is not more important than the return except logically, since the return is empty without the ascent. But the ascent itself is nothing better than self-actualization without the return. “*Return’ is the point at which, in interchange with the world, the message is spoken, enacted, built into liturgies or institutions, or embodied in laws. The return is the creative moment.*”²⁸⁹ Again, looking past Volf’s litany of what constitutes the experience of ‘return,’ we can see that from a Pauline perspective, the ‘return’ comprises the preaching and teaching ministry in the church. This process of *ascent* and *return* is cap-

²⁸⁶ I Timothy 4:15

²⁸⁷ II Timothy 2:15

²⁸⁸ Volf; 8.

²⁸⁹ *Idem.*

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tivated in such Pauline comments as “*For I received from the Lord that which I delivered to you...*” in I Corinthians 11:23, or the vision Paul recounts in II Corinthians 12 being followed by his commitment to “*gladly spend and be expended for your souls.*”²⁹⁰ Paul even downplays the ascent of which he speaks, in deference to the return message which he brought to the Corinthians believers.

It is doubtless not profitable for me to boast. I will come to visions and revelations of the Lord: I know a man in Christ who fourteen years ago – whether in the body I do not know, or whether out of the body I do not know, God knows – such a one was caught up to the third heaven. And I know such a man – whether in the body or out of the body I do not know, God knows – how he was caught up into Paradise and heard inexpressible words, which it is not lawful for a man to utter. Of such a one I will boast; yet of myself I will not boast, except in my infirmities. For though I might desire to boast, I will not be a fool; for I will speak the truth. But I refrain, lest anyone should think of me above what he sees me to be or hears from me.

(II Corinthians 12:1-6)

Passages like this one – of which there are not many – have perennially led believers to seek and expect such out-of-body experiences. But Paul’s words own description of his experience shows it to have been an *ascent* that could have no *return*, for he was not able to repeat to the Corinthians anything of the ‘inexpressible words’ which he heard. We are nowhere encouraged in Scripture to seek such experiences, but everywhere encouraged to seek the Lord and His wisdom. It has been a common, though perhaps subconscious, error to think that Paul was unique, that his ‘great knowledge,’ ad the Roman Governor Festus put it, was something only a few believers could attain to in any generation but certainly not the standard fare. This error – itself a denial of Paul’s admonition to all believers to *renew* their minds – has contributed greatly both to the hierarchical structure of the Church (and of churches) and to the doctrinal impoverishment of the same. It would surely not be a good thing for the average knowledge and wisdom of the congregation to surpass that of its pastors, but there has hardly been a danger of that happening, certainly not in recent memory. It is more the case that the

²⁹⁰ II Corinthians 12:15

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congregation never rises higher than does their pastor(s), and all too often that is not very high.

Much of modern evangelicalism ascends no higher than talk-radio, or the latest blog post or podcast. A slight step higher would be the frequent parroting of many pastors to their favorite para-church speaker or biblical commentator. It is undeniable that the intellectual (from a biblical perspective) quality of Western evangelical pulpits has declined dramatically since the days of Jonathan Edwards, Charles Spurgeon, or D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones. In many churches, especially mainline denominational churches, it is no longer uncommon for parishioners to surpass their leaders in biblical knowledge and understanding. But that is often only because the bar has been lowered so much, not because the average congregant is ‘ascending’ to God in study and devotion. Clericalism absolved the ‘laity’ of any personal responsibility to ascend, but then the clergy itself ceased to ascend, and the whole congregation descended. To address the first problem, that of the clergy/laity split, consider Paul’s prayer for every believer in Ephesus – and by inspiration every believer *ever* – in light of the concept of ‘ascending.’

Therefore I also, after I heard of your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love for all the saints, do not cease to give thanks for you, making mention of you in my prayers: that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give to you the spirit of wisdom and revelation in the knowledge of Him, the eyes of your understanding being enlightened; that you may know what is the hope of His calling, what are the riches of the glory of His inheritance in the saints, and what is the exceeding greatness of His power toward us who believe, according to the working of His mighty power which He worked in Christ when He raised Him from the dead and seated Him at His right hand in the heavenly places, far above all principality and power and might and dominion, and every name that is named, not only in this age but also in that which is to come.

(Ephesians 1:15-21)

In light of our current study, it is not inconsequential that Paul immediately refers this divine knowledge and wisdom to the self-awareness of the Church among its members.

And He put all things under His feet, and gave Him to be head over all things to the church, which is His body, the fullness of Him who fills all in all.

(Ephesians 1:22-23)

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Paul is here saying that the congregation – *all* believers and not just the ministers – should ardently seek that wisdom and understanding of both the hope and the power that has been given to the Church by virtue of her relationship as the Body of Christ, *in order that* the Church might grow into the “*fullness of Him who fills all in all.*” Thus the prophetic ‘ascent’ through prayer and diligent study, is first and foremost for the congregation’s edification, and is a condition of life that ought to be modeled by the pastors and imitated by the congregation.

And He Himself gave some to be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, and some pastors and teachers, for the equipping of the saints for the work of ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ, till we all come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to a perfect man, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ. (Ephesians 4:11-13)

From the perspective of ascent/return, we may summarize much of the current situation in Western evangelicalism in terms of what Volf refers to ‘ascent malfunctions’ which he defines as “a breakdown in the prophet’s encounter with the divine and reception of the message.”²⁹¹ Volf is using the term ‘prophet’ in this context not in reference to an Isaiah or Haggai, but rather to ‘practitioners’ of prophetic religions, especially those specially charged with the ‘return’ function of preaching and teaching. He notes that ‘ascent malfunction’ occurs when “practitioners of prophetic religions lose faith in the significance of the encounter with God *as* God and employ religious language to promote perspectives and practices whose content and driving force do not come from or are not integrally related to the core of the faith. No ascent has happened; instead, a *pretense* of ascent and of speaking and acting in the name of God is employed to promote preset desirable ends.”²⁹² Again, if one disregards Volf’s ecumenical extension of his analysis beyond evangelicalism, it is apparent that what he describes fits the current situation in many, if not most, evangelical churches and denominations. It becomes a question, if one does use the terminology of ascent regarding the actual activities of many modern evangelical pastors, of: *To what* are they ascending?

²⁹¹ Volf; 9.

²⁹² *Ibid.*; 10.

The standard ‘preset desirable end’ in many contemporary evangelical churches is ‘growth,’ though ‘relevance’ and ‘tolerance’ are rising on the list. Of course, it could be argued that these latter two are merely the currently-perceived means to the first end of ‘church growth.’ What is most important is that rarely is the goal of ascent Truth. There is a powerful subtilty in the modern substitution of ‘growth’ as a goal in the place of truth. Rarely is growth advocated for its own sake, rather it is argued that, since God is Love and He sent His Son to die for the world, church growth as a goal is merely the result of effective evangelism or impactful programs or therapeutic ministries. Much is indeed made of the current social condition (bad) in ‘church-growth’ literature, with the ostensible desire expressed that the message of the Church ought to be one of ‘healing’ and ‘love’ in a hurting world – ‘This is what God wants,’ we are told. But this is to approach Mt. Zion without any prior visit to Mt. Sinai. This is to ascend to a God of Grace but to ignore the Holy God of Sinai.

David Wells, in his sequel to *No Place for Truth*, asks a simple but profound question: “Why does God’s holiness weigh so lightly upon us?”²⁹³ Wells gives three reasons in answer to this question, the third (and perhaps most theologically significant) is the almost-universal characteristic of God as Love within the contemporary evangelical world. The logic that Wells believes lies behind the ‘God is Love’ movement is an example of inadequate ascension, though Wells does not employ Volf’s terminology. Note how the arrival at the love of God is a truncated ascent, failing to reach the peak of God’s self-disclosure, His absolute holiness.

If God’s holiness is his utter purity, his incomparable goodness, the measure of all that is true and right, the final line of resistance to all that is wrong, dark, and malignant, then love must be a part of this. If love is virtuous and right, it must be an expression of divine holiness, the essence of which is truth and right. God’s love is inescapably a manifestation of his holiness, as are his goodness, righteousness, mercy, and compassion.²⁹⁴

²⁹³ Wells, David F. *God in the Wasteland: The Reality of Truth in a World of Fading Dreams* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company; 1994); 133.

²⁹⁴ *Ibid.*; 136.

But contemporary evangelicalism fails, even refuses, to ascend the mountain to its peak – *holiness* – and settles rather for an appealing base camp at a much lower elevation – *love*. Wells writes, “Why has this happened? Because it is the easiest route to take. The habits and appetites of modernity are more attractive than the sacrifice and discipline of orthodox faith. God’s love seems less burdensome than his holiness. The church has succumbed to the seductions of our therapeutic culture, and in that context it seems quite natural to favor the relational dimension over the moral dimension, mysticism over cognitive conviction, self-fulfillment over personal surrender, self-image over character, pluralistic religious equality over the uniqueness of the Christian faith.”²⁹⁵ But the substitution of Love for Holiness, and the pretense that the speaker has indeed ascended to the peak and has brought back a ‘thus saith the Lord’ for the people, is destructive both of the Church’s inner life and her outer witness. “Robbed of such a God [*i.e.*, a holy God], worship loses its awe, the truth of his Word loses its ability to compel, obedience loses its virtue, and the church loses its moral authority.”²⁹⁶

Supremely this constitutes an offense of the ministers of the Word in evangelical churches and denominations, though its occurrence may justly be charged against the members of the congregations for allowing themselves such complacency as to let the minister alone ascend, as the Israelites bid Moses at Sinai, while refusing even to touch the mountain (or the Word) themselves. These sins of both commission and omission have damaged the Church in the 21st Century, and restoration of her identity and mission in the world certainly demands that believers again ascend to the peak through *devotion to the apostles’ teaching*, as it was in the earliest years of the Church’s existence. A spirit of enquiry is much needed in the Church today, the *panting after God as the deer after water* that ought to characterize anyone indwelt by the Holy Spirit, the One who searched the deep things of God (*cp.* I Cor. 2:10-16). This must begin with the pastor-teachers, but it cannot end there.

²⁹⁵ *Idem.*

²⁹⁶ *Idem.*

Return Malfunctions

Volf points out in his analysis that “every ascent malfunction is at the same time a return malfunction.”²⁹⁷ His unpacking of this statement, however, takes him into areas of ecumenism and universalism, to the all-to-modern solutions to evangelicalism’s problems that are themselves merely extensions of the problem. Yet his observation is just: “Whether the prophet’s pretend ascent to the mountain of God or descend from the mountain with what looks like God’s word but is in fact a message from the golden calf, the *return* too has been compromised. The prophets may be transforming the world, but God is not involved in the transformation; they are transforming it in their own name or in the name of some alien god.”²⁹⁸ The essence of this error is the abandonment of Truth and the erecting of some ‘truth’ in its place, whether it be love, or acceptance, wokeness, or even conservative political activism. The Church has repeated the sin of the Golden Calf time and again throughout the ages; there is serious danger that the contemporary Church has apostatized to her various idols completely.

Yet even in the midst of our modern, pluralistic society in which God has been marginalized to the point of atheism, the gospel of Jesus Christ remains *the power of God unto salvation*. When the Church sticks to her fundamental message, which is her fundamental power, she will inevitably be culturally *irrelevant*, and that in any age and in any culture. Wells notes that the modern Church “must first recover the sense of antithesis between Christ and culture and then find ways to sustain that antithesis.”²⁹⁹ Though his language is Niebuhrian, Wells’ point is essentially that of Paul in II Corinthians 6, there is no fellowship between Christ and Belial, between believers and the world. But in the world, the Church remains (and must remain) *the pillar and foundation of the truth*.³⁰⁰ Believers must ascend to the heights of the knowledge of God in His Word and by His Spirit, and then return to order their lives, their voices, and even their votes in accordance with the truth they will find there. That is the Prophetic Presence.

²⁹⁷ Volf; 12.

²⁹⁸ *Idem*.

²⁹⁹ Wells, *God in the Wasteland*; 223.

³⁰⁰ I Timothy 3:15

Lesson 12 – Dual Citizenship

Text: Romans 12:14-21, 13:1-14; Philippians 3:20-21; I Timothy 2:1-2

*“They have a right to all which the king has given them;
but not to all which they have given themselves.”*

(John Wesley)

To ask an American to be apolitical is like asking a dolphin not to swim. We are generally considered today as the most political people in the world; the average American is far more invested and involved in politics, both liberal and conservative, Democratic, Republican, than the citizens of any other country on the planet. It is in our DNA



John Witherspoon (1723-94)

and can be traced back to the decades before and during our revolutionary struggle with Great Britain. Political involvement, not to say activism, is also endemic to American religion, especially *Protestant* religion, though Roman Catholics are not far behind on the political involvement spectrum. It should not surprise us, then, to find that much of the revolutionary fervor that ignited and sustained the conflict with our mother country, was delivered from Colonial America’s pulpits. John Witherspoon, Presbyterian minister and President of Princeton University, was a signatory to both the Declaration of Independence and the Articles of Confederation as well as a delegate to the Second Continental Congress. Witherspoon was one of the most vocal of the colonial clergy in support of the revolution, but he was far from being the only one. Nor was there any lack of response at the time from loyalist clergy in the colonies. To see the influence of religion on the politics of colonial America is instructive both as to the ‘genetics’ of politics in our country’s heritage, as well as the contrast to the present, marginalized evangelical situation.

It is commonplace in any society to think that the current era is somehow unique from all that has gone before. We hear that modern American politics are more polarized and vitriolic than ever before. But that indicates far more a lack of historical awareness than an accurate diagnosis of the modern condition. Colonial America was

devoutly religious, and religiously political as well. The concept of ‘separation between Church and State’ was not what it has become: it was fully and solely intended to protect the Church from the State and not the other way around. The only opposition anyone had to another’s religion influencing his politics, was when the result was contrary to one’s own view. “The revolution was about politics; politics was about ideology; and ideology was about theology: therefore the revolution was about theology.”³⁰¹ This is a reductionist argument, but not far wrong as a broad summary of both the colonial era and the modern American politico-religious scene; again, both liberal and conservative.

The pulpit, however, was far stronger in Colonial America than in modern America, and the dynamics of religion-in-politics from that earlier era can serve as a valuable case study in terms of the modern attempts within evangelicalism to continue influencing American politics – now, however, in a post-Constantinian world. It also provides an excellent backdrop to analyzing such political activity in the name of religion, with the biblical guidelines and admonitions, especially those of the Apostle Paul. Finally, a look at the colonial situation, if done fairly, reminds us that even within professing Christianity there is always a difference of opinion, sometimes almost a myriad of opinions, all claiming the sanction of Scripture. Little is said about the *Loyalist* clergy in those revolutionary days, and it is all but assumed by modern, conservative evangelicals that they were misguided. The similarities between the 18th Century and the 21st, however, reminds us of Qohelet’s wisdom, “*There is nothing new under the sun.*”

The essence of the *patriotic* clergy during the pre-revolutionary and revolutionary era of our country was the evident wickedness of British governmental oppression and the evident righteousness and justice of the American cause. Witherspoon, for instance, in his 1776 sermon entitled “The Dominion of Providence over the Passions of Men,” summarizes the matter in no uncertain terms, at least not from a patriotic perspective.

³⁰¹ Walker, Peter W. “The Church Militant: The American Loyalist Clergy and the Making of the British Counterrevolution, 1701-92” PhD Dissertation submittal, Columbia University; 2016. [Walker_columbia_0054D_13580.pdf](#). Accessed 03October2023.

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If your cause is just – you may look with confidence to the Lord and intreat him to plead it as his own. You are all my witnesses, that this is the first time of my introducing any political subject into the pulpit. At this season, however, it is not only lawful but necessary, and I willingly embrace the opportunity of declaring my opinion without any hesitation, that the cause in which America is now in arms, is the cause of justice, liberty, and of human nature.³⁰²

This is the common refrain from colonial pulpits, though as we shall shortly see, not the only perspective that went forth in sermons of that era. As it is often the case in modern political discourse – especially within *religious* political discourse – there were diverse opinions as to the justice that Witherspoon thought so self-evident concerning the rebellion. It may be instructive to consider both sides of the colonial debate and compare it to modern issues. One of the most frequently quoted patriotic sermons from the era is Samuel Sherwood’s “The Church’s Flight into the Wilderness,” delivered “on a public occasion” from the text of Revelation 12:14-17. The full title is significant to illustrate the hermeneutic of the era, not far different from our own, by which biblical texts are seen to be applicable directly to political situations of the current day.

The Church’s Flight into the Wilderness: An Address on the Times. Containing some very interesting and important Observations on Scripture Prophecies: Shewing, that sundry of them plainly relate to Great Britain, and the American Colonies; and are fulfilling in the present day.³⁰³

The passage selected for the sermon is also indicative of the tendency to demonize one’s opponent; certainly the intended associations from the text to both Great Britain and to the American colonies is evident.

But the woman was given two wings of a great eagle, that she might fly into the wilderness to her place, where she is nourished for a time and times and half a time, from the presence of the serpent. So the serpent spewed water out of his mouth like a flood after the woman, that he might cause her to be carried away by the flood. But the earth helped the woman, and the earth opened its mouth and swallowed up the flood which the dragon had spewed out of his mouth. And the

³⁰² Witherspoon, John “The Dominion of Providence over the Passions of Men” reprinted in *Political Sermons of the American Founding Era: 1730-1805*, edited by Ellis Sandoz (Indianapolis: LibertyPress; 1991); 549.

³⁰³ Sherwood, *Ibid.*; 495.

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dragon was enraged with the woman, and he went to make war with the rest of her offspring, who keep the commandments of God and have the testimony of Jesus Christ.

(Revelation 12:14-17)

The association of the true church with the patriotic colonists, and vice versa, is characteristic of the patriotic sermons of the day, which did dominate the pulpits in the period from 1765 through to the end of the conflict in the early 1780s. The key and central theme of these sermons is the word *Liberty*, which echoes over and over again from the colonial pulpits. Liberty was threatened; Liberty was essential to the continued vitality of the true Church; Liberty was worth all that might and must be spent in possessions, time, and even blood. It was for Liberty that the original American settlers fled from the dragon (the Church of England?) to the shores of North America. And in the current conflict, the dragon has pursued the children of the Woman to America to rob them of that hard-fought Liberty.

Thus the church, in this difficult, distressed season, whenever it happened, was supported and carried, as it were, on eagles wings, to a distant remote wilderness, for safety and protection. And what period or event is there in all the history of her trials and persecutions, which these expressions more exactly describe, and to which they can be applied with more truth and propriety, than to the flight of our fore-fathers into this then howling wilderness, which was a land not sown nor occupied by any ruling power on earth, except by savages and wild beasts?³⁰⁴

One of the common features of political sermons is hyperbole: the intentional exaggeration of facts in order to stir up the emotions of the audience to a sufficient pitch to either initiate or continue a desired action. Along with hyperbole is the strong tendency to demonize the opposing party, not merely to counter the opposing view. These traits were consistent in the revolutionary pulpit of Colonial America. For instance, Jacob Cushing, the pastor of the church in Waltham, Massachusetts, was honored with the commemorative sermon on the third anniversary of the Battles of Lexington and Concord. The published version of this sermon was titled, *“Divine judgments upon tyrants: And compassion to the oppressed. A Sermon Preached at Lexington, April 20th, 1778,*

³⁰⁴ Sherwood, *Ibid*; 508.

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In commemoration of the *MURDEROUS WAR* and *RAPINE*, inhumanly perpetrated, by two brigades of *British troops*, in that town and neighborhood, on the NINETEENTH of APRIL, 1775. In remembrance of what was the opening salvo of the war – the ‘shot heard round the world,’ as it became known – Cushing speaks of “the *murderous war, rapine and devastation of that day*.”³⁰⁵ The recorded history of the running battles fought on April 19, 1775, lists an American armed contingent of 3,960 men arrayed in the towns of Lexington and Concord and all along the route back to Boston, against 1,500 British regulars who were charged with either seizing or destroying the militia’s armaments stored in and around the two towns. American losses totaled 49 killed, 39 wounded, and 5 missing or captured. British losses were more severe, with 73 killed, 174 wounded, and 53 missing or captured. Overall casualties for the combined forces came to 6% of forces engaged, again with the largest losses on the British side. Furthermore, other than the armaments destroyed, there was no loss of American property due to overt actions by the British troops. Now, this is not to say that the ensuing war furnished no examples of *murder, rapine and devastation*; it is only to note that Lexington and Concord hardly qualified for such a description. Consider the above engagement and casualty numbers when listening to Cushing continue in his commemoration of the ‘battlefield,’ speaking of the ‘design of this anniversary,’

...which is to keep in mind a solemn remembrance of the origin of the present murderous war, and more especially of the innocent blood wantonly shed around this sacred temple; and the subsequent slaughter and desolation by British troops, on that memorable day, April nineteenth, one thousand seven hundred, seventy-five: A day religiously to be regarded by all professed christians.³⁰⁶

But such is the nature of political sermons both in the revolutionary era and always. Cushing’s sermon continues throughout in this same vein, but with a strong call to repentance and amendment on the part of all Americans, judging as he did that the war was discipline from God upon His people, America. “The intention of God’s severe

³⁰⁵ Sandoz; 612.

³⁰⁶ *Ibid.*; 621.

dispensations being not the destruction of his people, but their amendment, it becomes them to acknowledge his hand, confess and forsake their sins, and importunately seek him for needed salvation."³⁰⁷ This is another characteristic of political preaching, both in revolutionary sermons and in the modern day. Calamities are the result of national sin; repentance and reformation are all that is required to turn the disciplinary hand of God away. Cushing displays the age-old logic once employed by Job's 'friends,' that God will not afflict the righteous.

And, perhaps, no instance can be produced of a nation's being given up to exterminating judgments and calamities, so long as virtue, probity and religion flourished among them. But when falsehood and perfidy, injustice and general corruption, with a contempt of religion, have generally prevailed among them, they have fallen into many calamities, and been deprived of those advantages they so much abused.³⁰⁸

In this, the revolutionary preacher still sees the faithfulness of God to restore His people, because they are His people and because their cause is, ultimately, just. The hope of the righteous will be the light that guides them through the struggle to victory and restoration at the other end. "We have encouragement then, to hope in God; that he will build up Zion – that he will appear still for us, under all our distresses and oppression – that he will *avenge the innocent blood* of our brethren, inhumanly shed in the beginning of the present unjust war – that he will *render vengeance to his and our adversaries* – and one day restore tranquility to our country – that he will make our land 'a quiet habitation,' when we may view it in perfect peace, and free from all fears of hostile invasions."³⁰⁹ Thus we see in this typical revolutionary-era sermon the characteristic traits of political preaching: claiming both God to be on our side *and* His holy righteousness in disciplining us for our sins. This necessitate the denial of any light to the 'adversary,' who is not of God and whose actions are unadulterated wickedness. It was common to compare the British to the Chaldeans in Habakkuk's day, a wicked and godless people used to discipline the children of Jehovah.

³⁰⁷ *Ibid.*; 619

³⁰⁸ *Ibid.*; 615.

³⁰⁹ *Ibid.*; 618.

But such demonizing could also be rendered literal in such an atmosphere, as it was in an anonymous tract published in Boston in 1782. Though not a sermon, it can hardly be doubted that the overall ‘us versus them’ tenor of the patriotic sermons before and during the war years motivated the tone of this treatise: “A Dialogue Between the DEVIL and GEORGE III, TYRANT of BRITAIN.” As the title indicates, the treatise is in the form of a dialogue between Satan and King George – anticipating C. S. Lewis’ *Screwtape Letters* by almost two hundred years. In the dialogue, George is portrayed as a whole-hearted devotee of Satan, a whoremonger and a deceitful liar whose ministers were themselves demonic and deluded minions in their master’s service. But while the king most famous on account of his bouts with insanity, unfaithfulness to his queen was not a charge leveled against him either at the time or since. *Ad hominem* arguments and defamation of character are the stuff of politics; the church should consider carefully before entering the fray.

Devil. Rebellion breaks out with new kindled rage in the southern provinces like the flames of Aetna. French and rebels, combined by links of adamant against you, and inspired by all the lion passions; bestir yourself, George, or perdition will catch you!

George. The rebels have no forces to make any figure in the field this year: Lord Cornwallis will sweep all before him, and the southern provinces will fall like leaves in autumn. And then for a trip and twitch at Old Massachusetts, that ancient seat of rebellion – I have fire and brimstone, and wrath and vengeance, laid up for those venomous cockatrice sons of rebellion. I’ll make the smoke of their torment rise seven hundred and seventy cubits high. My soul burns to be at ‘em. Adamses and Hancocks will be sweet fuel for my furnace! I’ll fill the Old South in Boston full of the chief rebels, with five hundred barrels of tar and brimstone: this conflagration will serve to illuminate the town on the glorious restoration of my royal government; and all the tories will say Amen. Old Time make haste and bring the blazing day.

Devil. You have a satanic heart; I wish your head was equal to it. I warn you again to look out for the French and rebels, or they’ll give you an Irish hoist e’re long.³¹⁰

This is, of course, the epitome of demonizing – the caricature of King George as the operative of Satan himself. But this is a serious temptation and danger to all political preaching, in our day no less than in the revolutionary period. Today, however, the op-

³¹⁰ *Ibid.*; 697.

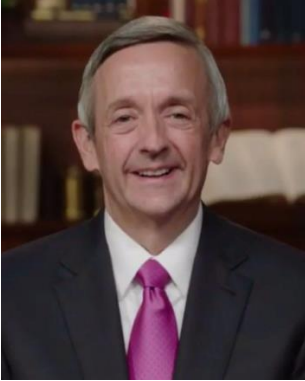
position is not accused of being in league with the devil, but only because very few people believe in the devil anymore. The essence of demonizing, however, remains: to castigate the opposing view as standing against all that is good and right, as deriving always from evil and self-serving motives, as being so little deserving of consideration as to be held in utmost contempt. But more, it is also to argue *ad hominem* that anyone holding the opposing view is himself or herself irrational, self-serving, and wicked.

These sermons in support of the revolution against Great Britain have been summarized here for several reasons pertinent to the current study. The first is the amazing similarity between the attitudes and even the words used in the 1760s and 70s with regard to the established government – King and Parliament: words like oppressive, wicked, tyrannical, etc. The patriotic preaching of the mid 18th Century has become the proud model of Christian political activism since that day, as indicated by the frequency with which those sermons are reproduced in contemporary, conservative Christian journals and websites. For instance, the Alliance of Confessing Evangelicals website *Place for Truth*, carries Samuel Sherwood’s popular sermon of 1774, “A Sermon Containing Scriptural Instructions to Civil Rulers” but does not contain any loyalist sermons of the same era. By this reference, one must assume that the ACE is in agreement with Sherwood’s admonition, “It is a duty incumbent upon us at all times, to keep a watchful attention to our interests; (especially in seasons of peril and danger) to watch and pray that we fall not.”³¹¹ The right to rebellion is as assumed today as it was concluded by so many patriotic preachers 250 years ago.

A second reason to review and remember our founding era with regard to politics in the pulpit, is to recognize that it was then that the seeds of ‘Christian Nationalism’ were sown, seeds which have grown throughout the history of the United States, and which are yielding a bumper crop within contemporary evangelicalism. It is common to see the American flag stationed somewhere on the stage of a modern, American church, since it is taken as axiomatic that to be Christian is to be patriotic, in much the

³¹¹ Sherwood, Samuel “A Sermon Containing Scriptural Instructions to Civil Rulers”; ["A Sermon Containing Scriptural Instructions to Civil Rulers ..." Samuel Sherwood - Place For Truth](#). Accessed 07October2023.

same sense vis-à-vis government as the 18th Century preachers were patriotic. A key representative of the current state of Christian Nationalism is First Baptist Church of Dallas and its Senior Pastor, Robert Jeffress. Jeffress is self-styled and well known as the



Robert Jeffress (b. 1955)

‘Trump Pastor’ because of his association and support for former President Donald Trump. First Baptist Dallas under Jeffress’ leadership, has become a beacon of Christian Nationalism, with extensive activities in political campaigning, publications, and sermons. The last Sunday in June is dedicated as ‘Freedom Sunday,’ and often has guest speakers from a branch of the government. One attendee of the 2018 Freedom

Sunday – attending, it should be noted, as part of research on the phenomenon of Christian Nationalism – notes that Jeffress began his sermon by reading a letter of praise to the church from then-Vice President Mike Pence.³¹² But before Jeffress ascended the stage there has already been an elaborate musical and video production emphasizing patriotism.

We climbed up to our balcony seats as the 200-member choir sang ‘The Saints God Marching In’ and ‘This Land Is Your Land.’ Worship continued with the national anthem. Then there was a ‘Salute to the Armed Forces’ featuring a medley of anthems while uniformed men and women representing each branch of the military walked out on stage, and veterans or service members of that branch stood to the audience’s applause. The end of this salute included pyrotechnic fireworks that exploded up the edges of the church orchestra. After a rousing special anthem titled ‘His Truth Keeps Marching On,’ an arrangement based on the Civil War’s ‘Battle Hymn of the Republic,’ Pastor Jeffress climbed the steps to begin his sermon.³¹³

This description would not disturb the majority of professing Christians in contemporary, *conservative*, America. Nor would the use of the word ‘worship’ to describe the liturgy of Freedom Sunday, simply because so many conservative evangelical churches in the United States have similar services on the Sunday nearest Independence

³¹² The keynote speaker for the 2023 Freedom Sunday was Senator James Lankford (R-OK), a professing Christian.

³¹³ Purcell, Marie Olson “‘Oh, Those Words Are So Divisive, Pastor!’: Christian Nationalism and Identity Expression in the United States” *Word & World*, Volume 43, Number 2 (Spring 2023); 140.

Day, July 4th, though undoubtedly on a much smaller scale than First Baptist Dallas. Such ‘worship’ services confuse *nationalism*, and particularly *Christian nationalism*, with *patriotism*; the two are not synonymous. ‘Patriotism’ is one’s affinity for the land of one’s birth, or perhaps one’s adopted land (if the adoption was voluntary). Patriotism does, of course, imply support for one’s country, and even participation in rituals such as the Fourth of July parades and fireworks. ‘Nationalism’ may be defined as ‘patriotism run amok.’ Nationalism is almost by definition divisive, since it attempts to define those who are ‘true’ citizens of the nation. Joseph Baker notes that the narratives derived from nationalism “are ideologies centered around the idea of who constitutes the legitimate members of a political community that is rooted in a particular location.”³¹⁴

Nationalism traditionally forms as a counteraction to immigration, a situation in which the ‘native’ population of a country is threatened in its cultural majority by the influx of people from different nations and cultures. Nationalism, hence, is characterized by jingoism and bigotry, while it gains to itself a degree of credibility by masquerading as patriotism. The assumption being, of course, that only native members of a society can be truly patriotic. *Christian nationalism*, then, formulates this narrative around the ‘Christian’ roots of the country, in particular the United States. “Christian nationalism is a cultural framework – a collection of myths, traditions, symbols, narratives, and values systems – that idealizes and advocates a fusion of Christianity with American civic life.”³¹⁵ Baker points out that historically nationalism arises when the majority of any society feels threatened by the influx, and increasing political influence, of groups that differ politically, religiously, or ethnically. He claims “the impetus to make Christian nationalism a political focal point is a reaction against fears about the declining significance of White Protestantism.”³¹⁶

The fundamental talking-point of contemporary Christian Nationalism is the idea that the United States is either a ‘Christian Nation’ or was at least founded on

³¹⁴ Metzger, Paul Louis and Joseph O. Baker “Contemporary Issues with Christian Nationalism in the United States” *Cultural Encounters*, Volume 17, Number 1; 72.

³¹⁵ *Idem*.

³¹⁶ *Ibid.*; 74.

Christian principles. Thus modern Christian Nationalists are self-proclaimed puritans who only wish to take American society back to its roots in White, Protestant Colonial America. There is certainly a plausibility in the claim, since the founding generations of Americans were undoubtedly far more homogenous in ethnicity (British) and religion (Protestant) than contemporary American society. Indeed, religion was much talked about and religious terminology much used in the colonial era, especially (as we have seen) with regard to the proposed, and then prosecuted Revolution. Purcell notes the historical link made between 21st Century Christian Nationalists and the 18th Century Founding Fathers, “The history of the United States does clearly include leaders who envisioned and described America as a Christian nation...There have always been Americans who see the nation as deeply connected to Christianity.”³¹⁷ But things are not as simple as a reference to God or Providence or Christianity by this or that Founding Father, Congressman, or Supreme Court Justice. “There also have always been diverse opinions and articulations of what that means in practice [*i.e.*, America as a Christian nation], with some factions of Christians even using their beliefs to justify the displacement of Native Americans, slavery, Jim Crow laws, and the second-class citizenship of women.”³¹⁸

This leads to a third reason for reviewing the political pulpit from our country’s founding era: sometimes things are said in a political environment and from the pulpit, that have nothing to do with the Christian Gospel and are often proven to be false. It should be a well-known characteristic of politics that words are used to prove points and win arguments, not as vehicles of truth. In the heat of political conflict, the pulpit has too often been used as a political soapbox, and preachers have laid claims and made statements purporting to be factual, if not prophetic, only for those statements and claims to be proven false. A humorous (if the pulpit were not so serious a place) example is recounted by historian Mary Beth Norton in *1774: The Long Year of the Revolution*. Norton traces the reaction to the Tea Act of Lord North’s government in April 1773, an

³¹⁷ Purcell; 141.

³¹⁸ *Idem.*

act designed to buck up the financial position of the East India Company by placing a duty of 3 pence to the pound of EIC tea imported into the American Colonies. Norton's account of the reaction of the individual colonies, and individuals within each colony, is instructive in reminding us that there is never unanimity within a society, no matter how grievous the matter (and it was the loyalists' argument that a 3 pence duty was by no means grievous). What is noteworthy in this context is the response from the pulpits, where in several instances tea itself was condemned as a wanton luxury, and women condemned with it for their allegedly uncontrolled consumption of it.

For Peter Whitney, the fundamental problem was overindulgence in tea, a 'needless luxury,' which had led colonists into 'excesses of wickedness.' Women especially had engaged in slanderous talk, in 'idle, vain and sinful conversation,' while imbibing the beverage. Thus the Port Act was perhaps 'a just frown of heaven upon the town and country, for their...amazing extravagance in the consumption of foreign commodities.'³¹⁹

This is just one example of thousands, perhaps hundreds of thousands, of cases in which a preacher claimed to understand the mind of God in terms of the behavior of men (and women) with respect to a current or portended 'calamity.' Thus we heard from evangelical and fundamentalist pulpits, that Hurricane Katrina in 2005 was a divine act of punishment on the city of New Orleans on account of the permissive and homosexual culture there. Contemporary evangelical pulpits are resounding with warnings about the 'Deep State' and the government plans to infiltrate the homes and minds of unsuspecting American citizens. Dispensational pulpits have long told us that the condition of prosperity in the United States is tied directly and divinely to this country's continued support for the State of Israel. And on it goes. But such statements have no foundation in Scripture, do not constitute the least part of the gospel, and expose the preacher to eventual proof of falsehood, thus discrediting the gospel and Christianity.

Such preaching has always found an audience in the United States because the culture here is already so politically charged, a characteristic of 'Americanism' that Alexis de Tocqueville noted frequently in his journal, *Democracy in America*. The viru-

³¹⁹ Norton, Mary Beth 1774: *The Long Year of Revolution* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf; 2020); 158.

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lence of such political preaching increases whenever issues strongly divide the culture, such as the modern issues of gender fluidity and reparations for the descendants of slaves. Rarely does a contemporary cultural issue have a direct point of contact with Scripture, but equally rarely does the Bible have *nothing* to say on a contemporary issue. It must be stated clearly here, that when the Bible does speak directly to an issue, the pulpit must be unequivocal in maintaining the biblical message and truth. The problem, however, of trying to get to the root of the Truth with respect to any cultural or social or political issue has rarely been merely exegetical; in the United States the preacher is always competing with a myriad of voices outside the church, all vying for the obedience and following of the members of the congregation.

We have seen throughout the Pauline Studies how the apostle fought against what we might reasonably called ‘tribalism’ within the nascent Christian churches to which he ministered and wrote. Jews and Gentiles, men and women, slaveholders and slaves, and all other socio-economic ‘tribes’ tended to naturally segregate within the community of faith and, having segregated, then to oppose one another. Tribalism is perhaps the basal form of human society, and Americans are naïve to think that the phenomenon exists only in the undeveloped world. In many respects, contemporary Christian Nationalism is a clear form of tribalism. Tribalism never leads to Truth because the facts of any case are mediated through the tribal leaders via a transmission that Joseph Baker calls ‘narrowcast messaging.’ By this method, the members of the tribe are convinced that ‘truth’ can only be attained through selected media, and that information received through an ‘illicit’ media can immediately be dismissed as ‘fake news.’ Baker writes, “In the age of cable news, and even more so now with the internet and smartphones, people can and often do filter their information intake through highly partisan sieves. This type of media quite often plays upon and deepens perceptions of threat, as well as the moral righteousness of the in-group receiving the narrowcast mes-

saging.”³²⁰ Partial or un-truths are propagated through the narrowcast messaging, and opposing perspectives are never heard.

This phenomenon is common both to human society and particularly to American society. The case study of colonial preaching again offers an excellent example of the reality that *other views* do exist, and cannot immediately be dismissed as unbiblical or heretical. Thus the fourth reason to consider the political preaching of the colonial era is to hear the voices of those who dissented to the majority view, and paid a high price for their dissent. These were the ‘loyalist preachers,’ most of whom lost their positions, their homes, and their country as they were quickly forced out of the colonies to England.³²¹ In the controversial climate stemming from the Tea Act, and subsequent ‘Coercive Acts’ attempting to punish Boston for her (in)famous Tea Party, the colonial response was by no means uniform. In fact, as Norton shows in her record of the events, very few colonists, even in Massachusetts, supported the destruction of EIC tea and even fewer considered the current conflict with the mother country as cause for rebellion. But it is often the case when political preaching latches on to a sensitive issue, that moderation and compromise are the first casualties.

The Reverend John Sayre was the Anglican rector of the church at Fairfield, Connecticut. When the conflict over East India tea arose across the colonies, Sayre was caught in the maelstrom, trying to walk a middle line between the extremists on both sides of the controversy. Sayre was presented with what was essentially a ‘statement of patriotic faith,’ as it were, to sign as indication of his commitment to ‘his country’ and to the ‘patriotic cause’ of opposing Parliament and its ongoing ‘oppression’ of the colonies. Phrases are put in quotation marks here not to indicate the truth or falsehood of each, but rather to indicate that these events occurred in 1773-74, *before* shots were fired at Lexington and Concord and *before* any declaration had been made by the united colonies with respect to their relationship with the mother country. It was a time, if ever there was one in the overall season of tension between Britain and her Colonies, when

³²⁰ Metzger & Baker; 76.

³²¹ It should be noted that most of the loyalist preachers were ‘American.’ Only one referenced here, Jonathan Boucher, had been born in England.

opposing views might have been heard. But what is significant about the Reverend Sayre is that he attempted mightily to *take no side*. In response to the statement that he was requested/required to sign, he wrote to the Committee of Correspondence responsible for Fairfield,

I beg to be considered as a servant (though unworthy) of the *gospel of Christi*, who am informed by one of its *inspired preachers*, that the '*weapons of our warfare are not carnal, but mighty through God, to the brining of every thought to the obedience of Christ;*' which expressions plainly designate them to be *spiritual*. I dare not, therefore, promise to take up and use any *carnal arms* at all. The same apostle teacheth me, that 'in whatsoever state I am, therewith I must be content.' If, therefore, the providence of *God* should bring me into a state even of slavery itself, I desire that his trill may be done; and that I may be content with that lot, (however hard) and considering myself at the same time as being the *Lord's* freeman, may cheerfully as well as faithfully discharge my duties in that state, knowing that in *Christ Jesus* there is neither bond nor free. I dare not, therefore, resolve that I will be free, because I am sensible that many better men than myself have, by the providence of *God*, been permitted to be brought into a state of bondage; and that I ought not to complain if I should be made partaker of the same affliction.³²²

Given the nature of American society as highly politicized, it is unlikely that the Reverend Sayre did not have a personal opinion regarding the events that were transpiring at the time; he, however, maintained that it was forbidden to his calling as a minister of the gospel to 'take sides,' as it were, so as to voice a judgment one way or the other. When asked to seek divine blessing on the patriotic cause, Sayre responded,

I know not, gentlemen, that this, if it be true, is a proper rule for Christians to judge upon concerning the goodness or badness of any cause of this kind, in any controversy; for history, sacred and profane, furnisheth us with many instances in which we shall all agree in saying, that the most unjust cause did not always meet an overthrow, nor the most just prosper...It can be of very little importance to the community, whether I subscribe the Association or not: for I am no politician; am not connected with politicians as such, and never will be either. These things belong not to my profession, and I find sufficient employment for my head and for my heart in that honourable, though arduous

³²² Sayre, John "Letter from the Rev. John Sayre to the Committee for Fairfield" Northern Illinois University Digital Library. [Letter from the Rev. John Sayre to the Committee for Fairfield, assigning his reasons for not signing the Association | Northern Illinois University Digital Library \(niu.edu\)](#). Accessed 08October2023.

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calling, to which, in the presence of the adorable *Trinity*, I have vowed to devote my whole life.³²³

Sayre maintained that this position of neutrality, enjoined on him by virtue of his profession as a minister of the gospel, could not be viewed as lacking in patriotism or as disloyalty, without that being a violation of the ninth commandment against him. He writes, “I take for granted, that the design of this Association is to make a discrimination between the friends of *America* and its liberties, and the enemies of both. And I now beg the Committee to believe me, when I declare, in the presence of Him who knows all hearts, and before whom I am to be finally judged in that awful [d]ay, when the secrets of all hearts shall be revealed, that I am a most sincere friend to both. *America* is my native country; all my connexions [*sic*] are in it. I have enjoyed the liberty and plenty of it, through the goodness of *God*, too long and too thankfully not to be sensible of the value of both, and to desire a continuance of them, if it be his will.”³²⁴ As with neutrals in every conflict, Sayre’s position was rejected by the Committee; he eventually fled with the British army to New York, where loyalist refugees were gathering to eventually ship out to Britain. It should be kept in mind, in light of the sequel, that Sayre was born in the colonies and not in England; he was, as he protests and affirms, an *American*.

Jonathan Boucher, on the other hand, was an émigré. Born in Cumberland, England, Boucher moved to the colony of Virginia in 1759 to serve as a private tutor for plantation families. In this capacity he taught George Washington’s stepson, John Parke Custis. His friendship with Washington would not, however, prevent his banishment back to England on account of his loyalist views. Boucher was more outspoken than Sayre regarding the attitudes of Americans



Jonathan Boucher (1738-1804)

toward Great Britain during the crises of the mid-1760s to the mid-1770s. He was, however, less biblical in his argument against colonial resistance to Parliamentary laws.

³²³ *Idem.*

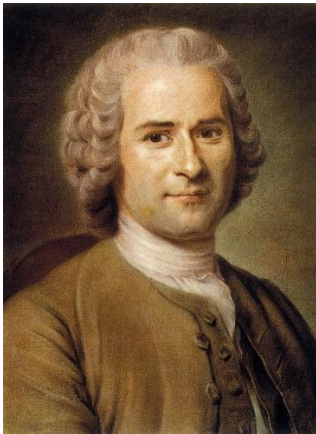
³²⁴ *Idem.*

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Boucher argued much as the patriotic proponents of liberty, on the basis of Natural Law and Reason, with reference to Scripture and God thrown in when appropriate to the argument. His classic sermon, “On Civil Liberty, Passive Obedience, and Nonresistance,” is a thoroughly Enlightenment treatise, relying heavily on interpretations of human relations to government from the ‘nature of things.’ He does reference providence, as Sayre does, but with fewer actual references to biblical admonitions.

Obedience to government is every man’s duty, because it is every man’s interest; but it is particularly incumbent on Christians, because (in addition to its moral fitness) it is enjoined by the positive commands of God; and, therefore, when Christians are disobedient to human ordinances, they are also disobedient to God. If the form of government under which the good providence of God has been pleased to place us be mild and free, it is our duty to enjoy it with gratitude and with thankfulness and, in particular, to be careful not to abuse it by licentiousness. If it be less indulgent and less liberal than in reason it ought to be, still it is our duty not to disturb and destroy the peace of the community by becoming refractory and rebellious subjects and resisting the ordinances of God.³²⁵

Boucher continues his discourse showing the relationship between law and liberty, using rational logic to show that liberty flows from law and the absence of law is not



Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712-78)

liberty, but licentiousness and anarchy. “True liberty, then, is a liberty to do everything that is right, and the being restrained from doing anything that is wrong. So far from our having a right to do everything we please, under a notion of liberty, liberty itself is limited and confined – but limited and confined only by laws which are at the same time both its foundation and its support.”³²⁶ Boucher denies the concept of ‘Social Compact,’ the political theory advanced by

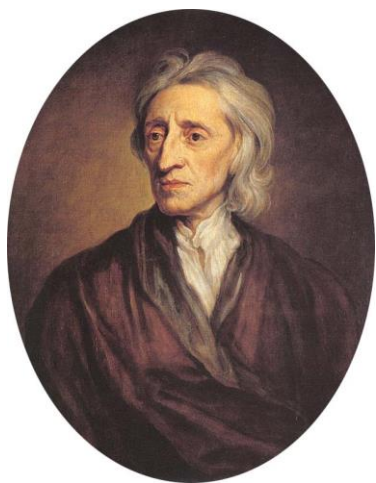
the French philosopher Jean Jacques Rousseau, in which government is seen to be a voluntary compact between members of society. Boucher points out, accurately, that

³²⁵ Boucher, Jonathan “On Civil Liberty, Passive Obedience, and Nonresistance” [Jonathan Boucher: On Civil Liberty, Passive Obedience, and Nonresistance \(constitution.org\)](https://www.constitution.org/jb/ocivil.htm). Accessed 08October2023.

³²⁶ *Idem*.

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there is no historical evidence of a society voluntarily establishing government by social contract in order to foster the 'common good.' "In no instance have mankind every yet agreed as to what is, or is not, 'the common good.' A form or mode of government cannot be named, which these 'common feelings' and 'common consent,' the sole arbiters, as it seems, of 'common good,' have not, at one time or another, set up and established, and again pulled down and reprobated."³²⁷ Boucher shows that the logic of rebellion and of 'social contract' is itself productive of rebellion and cannot form stable human government, "The same principle of equality that exempts him from being governed without his own consent clearly entitles him to recall and resume that consent whenever he sees fit; and he alone has a right to judge when and for what reasons it may be resumed."³²⁸ Thus Boucher anticipates in the history of the United State the time when the southern States would remove their consent to participation in the constitutional Union, and when the northern States would deny the southern States the very same right of refusal that they themselves advocated against Great Britain in the revolutionary period. But Boucher's arguments, being logical and philosophical, are no stronger than those of the patriotic preachers who quoted Rousseau and John Locke to advance



John Locke (1632-1704)

their rights of resistance and, eventually, rebellion. Locke's political philosophy was seminal to the American cause, advocating as he did a people's right to rebellion. But Boucher powerfully shows the circular and self-destructive logic of Locke's theory, that no stable government can result from rebellion since the seeds of rebellion are thereby sown for the future. The bottom line is that, whenever the people have the right to remove their consent from the established government, no government

can afterward be stable.

But all of this is political argument and philosophy. Does the Bible have nothing

³²⁷ *Idem.*

³²⁸ *Idem.*

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to say regarding the relationship of believers to the form of government under which they live? Actually, Scripture has far more to say in support of the loyalist argument than the patriotic, and there was no lack of loyalist preachers to point this out. With regard to Paul's letters, we have the seemingly unequivocal words of Roman 13 to deal with in regard to a believer's proper situation vis-à-vis government.

Let every soul be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and the authorities that exist are appointed by God. Therefore whoever resists the authority resists the ordinance of God, and those who resist will bring judgment on themselves. For rulers are not a terror to good works, but to evil. Do you want to be unafraid of the authority? Do what is good, and you will have praise from the same. For he is God's minister to you for good. But if you do evil, be afraid; for he does not bear the sword in vain; for he is God's minister, an avenger to execute wrath on him who practices evil. Therefore you must be subject, not only because of wrath but also for conscience' sake. For because of this you also pay taxes, for they are God's ministers attending continually to this very thing. Render therefore to all their due: taxes to whom taxes are due, customs to whom customs, fear to whom fear, honor to whom honor.

(Romans 13:1-7)

This passage seems quite straightforward in prohibiting rebellion, but patriotic preachers turned Paul's statement in verse 4 into a conditional: "For he is God's minister to you for good," becomes, "So long as he is a good minister to you, he is God's." Legitimacy as a divine minister then becomes the judgment of the people governed; the magistrate must meet the criteria of 'good governance' in order to avoid rebellion against his rule. "Patriot preachers who dealt with Romans 13 tried to turn Paul's description in verses 3 and 4 of governing authorities and what they *do* into qualifications or benchmarks that rulers must meet – to the satisfaction of the observer – in order to qualify as legitimate authorities to whom subjection is due."³²⁹ This exegetical slight of hand established a Lockean hermeneutic – incorporating the people's right of rebellion as an *a priori* – into the interpretation of biblical passages that otherwise seem to enjoin submission and obedience. "This is the common subtle, but strategic, change in the text that the Patriots depended on for much of their argument. This makes being a minister of

³²⁹ Frazer, Gregg L. *God Against the Revolution: The Loyalist Clergy's Case Against the American Revolution* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas; 2018); 46.

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God a qualification in order to be considered a magistrate rather than the magistrate's identity and function – something to aspire to rather than what one is in essence... This is critically important for the Patriot position because it allows the observer to decide whether or not someone is a legitimate magistrate based on whether or not the subject approves of the magistrate's actions."³³⁰

Another subtlety found in patriotic sermons on Romans 13 focuses on verse 7, "*Render to all their due.*" In a similar manner to their handling of the term 'good' as a subjective judgment made by the governed, here the definition of 'due' is interpreted under the Enlightenment philosophy of what constituted just and fair requirements from the government upon the governed; anything beyond this was deemed beyond what is 'due,' and hence, tyranny. John Joachim Zubly, a Swiss



John Joachim Zubly (1724-81)

émigré to the colonies and preacher in Savannah, Georgia, supported the patriot cause up the point of rebellion. Arguing the point as to the definition of 'due,' Zubly says,

The case I would state thus, 'Whether any duty or impost supposed to be laid on in an illegal manner, and inconsistent with natural and civil right, from motives of conscience ought nevertheless be paid?' and to elucidate this, I observe, the general rule is this: 'Render therefore to all their dues; tribute to whom tribute is due, custom to whom custom; fear to whom fear, honour to whom honour.' Rom. xiii.7. There is something *due* to government which cannot be refused without injustice, and more than which cannot be demanded without tyranny and oppression.³³¹

The result of this hermeneutic is the same as with the word 'good' earlier in Paul's treatise: the determination of what is 'due' the government as a just and equitable requirement devolves upon the governed and not the government. But does this not entirely hollow out Paul's admonition to submission? Does it not terminally weaken the attached threat, "*Therefore whoever resists the authority resists the ordinance of God, and those*

³³⁰ *Ibid.*; 49.

³³¹ Quoted by Frazer; 50.

who resist will bring judgment on themselves."³³² One might argue that the defense would be, "I did not consider the magistrate to be acting in accordance with 'good' or that what was demanded went, in my opinion, beyond that which is 'due'" Indeed, that has been the essence of political preaching since the revolutionary times: the occupant of the pulpit decides whether the magistrate is acting 'good' and 'just' so as to deserve the submission of the people, or he is not, and therefore resistance and even rebellion are justified. But such exegesis not only does little justice to what Paul writes, it contradicts Peter's simpler exhortation with regard to governing authorities.

Therefore submit yourselves to every ordinance of man for the Lord's sake, whether to the king as supreme, or to governors, as to those who are sent by him for the punishment of evildoers and for the praise of those who do good. For this is the will of God, that by doing good you may put to silence the ignorance of foolish men – as free, yet not using liberty as a cloak for vice, but as bond-servants of God. Honor all people. Love the brotherhood. Fear God. Honor the king.

(I Peter 2:13-17)

It is the dilemma of the American especially, to square civil resistance and even rebellion with these passages from the apostles that seem clearly to enjoin submission, regardless of the circumstance. Indeed, it is fairly certain that the highest magistrate in the empire when Paul and Peter wrote these words was Nero, hardly renown in history for equity and justice. The local magistrates were rarely higher in caliber than Pontius Pilate, who abandoned his own judgment concerning the innocence of Jesus and bowed to the masses, thus committing the greatest injustice in world history. The challenge is, as noted, especially acute in the United States, a culture that seems to breed political beings in a manner and to a degree unequalled in human history. It is further intensified by the fact that believers possess dual citizenship: citizens of their earthly nation and citizens of the kingdom of Jesus Christ.

This is where the rubber meets the road for American believers; as it did in the mid-1700s so it continues to do now. Paul, of course, makes this explicit in his letter to the Philippians, "*For our citizenship is in heaven, from which we also eagerly wait for the Sav-*

³³² Romans 13:2

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ior, the Lord Jesus Christ."³³³ The word Paul uses in this verse is *politeuma*, derived from the word from which we get the English 'polity' and 'politics.' This is the only place in the New Testament where the word is found, and it is significant that Paul uses it in a letter to the church in Philippi, which was itself a Roman colony. People born in Philippi were born as Roman citizens, and were very proud of that fact. It is as if Paul is saying that believers, wherever they live in the world, are a 'colony of heaven' – their true citizenship is from heaven; that is their birthright. The political activism especially of American believers is an indication that their earthly citizenship is dominant, their heavenly citizenship recessive. The major problem with this in actual application is that, as we see in the political wranglings of the revolutionary era (and no less in the political controversies of the 21st Century) it is very difficult, if not impossible, for the believer to engage in the political arena and at the same time faithfully discharge his or her duty to "*Owe no one anything except to love one another.*"³³⁴

Paul is merely echoing the second half of the greatest commandment, to love one's neighbor as himself. But as with the definition of 'good' and 'due' in terms of the legitimate magistrate, so also 'neighbor' has been subjected to tortuous interpretations, no less today than when Jesus himself was asked, "*Who is my neighbor?*" Can someone who holds political and, indeed, *moral*, perspectives diametrically opposed to mine be my neighbor? We all know the answer: *yes!* "The neighbour was not merely the fellow believer and could be anyone. But the neighbour was not everyone. The neighbour in view was indeed the neighbour, the person encountered in the course of daily life whose need laid a claim upon the believer's resources."³³⁵ Political conflict is rarely loving; the majority of the loyalist preachers lost their homes, possessions, and country.

When the believer realizes and fully incorporates the New Creation and New Humanity into his or her thinking – including, of course, *political* thinking – it becomes more evident that, along with John Sayre at the time of the Revolution, the he or she cannot get too involved in the political conflicts of the day without compromising both

³³³ Philippians 3:20

³³⁴ Romans 13:8a

³³⁵ Dunn; 679.

truth and love. The fact that modern, American believers have a far greater involvement and influence (or so it seems) in the political arena than did his 1st Century brethren, does not alter the structural realities of the Two Kingdoms perspective of the New Testament. That a 21st Century American believe *can* become involved and even embroiled in the political process does not mean that he or she *should* become involved. “Political realism for Paul meant living *within* the political system, even if it meant to a large extent living on the terms laid down by that system.”³³⁶ Dunn points out that this, too, is part of the eschatological tension of the ‘now-and-not-yet.’

Where does this leave the modern, American believer with respect to the political arena? Non-involvement? Should the believer even vote? Can one be patriotic and still be a faithful Christian? It is not certain that these questions admit of a single, comprehensive answer. Rather, it seems that the ‘right to vote’ presents a challenge to the modern believer that his ancient (and medieval, and early modern) brother never faced.

Here again we have to recognize the political realities within which these first Christian churches had to exist. There was no possibility for them to exercise political power such as the democracies of the twentieth century take for granted. The responsibilities of ancient government were exercised by a few by right of birth, connection, wealth, or ruthless self-advancement. For the rest, the great majority, there was no political power and no realistic hope of wielding it.³³⁷

But Dunn here assumes that modern believer actually *have* political power, a concept investigated and negated in an earlier lesson. The greatest proportion of real political power is still held by those ‘by right of birth, connection, wealth, or ruthless self-advancement,’ and the average citizen has pitifully little real political power. So the question remains whether the change in political theory from hereditary monarchy to republican democracy has any bearing on the interpretation of the Scriptures. To say that we *may* resist political authority – theoretically *still* ordained by God – simply because we *can*, is the hermeneutic of acculturation. Our culture is different, so our duties are as well. One doubts that either Paul or Peter would agree.

³³⁶ Dunn; 680.

³³⁷ *Idem.*

Lesson 13 – Temple or Tower

Text: Acts 17:22-31; I Corinthians 15:20-28; Ephesians 4:11-16

*“The post-modern mood is essentially nihilistic.
It wanders the world blankly,
no longer looking for meaning.”
(David Wells)*

In the Genesis narrative of the Tower of Babel, we read about an aspect of the human condition – fallen in sin – that is frequently overlooked in our modern, individualistic culture. What is generally remembered from the story is how God scattered the peoples by confusing their language; historically the creation of the various languages of the human race.³³⁸ God’s actions were, in spite of surface appearance, *gracious* in that they prevented mankind from achieving a consolidation of wicked intention and ambition. Man, fallen in sin yet still the ‘image of God,’ united by language, was capable of achieving a unity in wickedness that, humanly-speaking, would render mankind unredeemable. Thus we see that the scattering of the peoples by the confusion of language was parallel to the stationing of the angel with the flaming sword at the entrance to Eden – an act of divine (though not saving) grace that restrained Man from the full exercise of his moral rebellion.

And the LORD said, “Indeed the people are one and they all have one language, and this is what they begin to do; now nothing that they propose to do will be withheld from them. Come, let Us go down and there confuse their language, that they may not understand one another’s speech.” So the LORD scattered them abroad from there over the face of all the earth, and they ceased building the city. Therefore its name is called Babel, because there the LORD confused the language of all the earth; and from there the LORD scattered them abroad over the face of all the earth.
(Genesis 11:6-9)

This is the narrative of Babel from the perspective of God. The same story contains the meaning of the narrative from the perspective of Man, and it is this perspective that impinges upon our current study most cogently. For it is here that we read of the

³³⁸ Cp. Genesis 11:1

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collective ambition of mankind, an ambition that has only changed in form, but not in intention, through the millennia since Babel.

Now the whole earth had one language and one speech. And it came to pass, as they journeyed from the east, that they found a plain in the land of Shinar, and they dwelt there. Then they said to one another, "Come, let us make bricks and bake them thoroughly." They had brick for stone, and they had asphalt for mortar. And they said, "Come, let us build ourselves a city, and a tower whose top is in the heavens; let us make a name for ourselves, lest we be scattered abroad over the face of the whole earth." (Genesis 11:1-4)

Here is the biblical commentary on the history of empire: *"Let us make a name for ourselves."* The obstacle that God placed in his way has indeed succeeded in the ultimate sense, for as Paul comments on the situation in Acts 17, it has been essentially and divinely forbidden that any empire of man should obtain universal dominion either in space or time.

And He has made from one blood every nation of men to dwell on all the face of the earth, and has determined their preappointed times and the boundaries of their dwellings... (Acts 17:26)

Thus the cycle of history continued from the pre-ancient times, through classical antiquity, medieval, early-modern, and modern eras, down to our own time: nations rise and fall; empires come and go; Man continues his quest to *"make a name for himself"* and God continues to providentially constrain him. This is what is called a 'metanarrative,' and it is one that all nations ignore during their zenith, and reflect upon ruefully upon their demise. From the perspective of the Church's role in the World, however, it is a crucial piece in the framework, a structural component that is remarkably load-bearing. This is because it highlights the fundamental difference between what Man is attempting to build in the world – a *Tower* – and what God is now building through the Church – a *Temple*. The Tower was, of course, a temple of sorts, but the god to be worshipped there is Man. Paul indicts this false, idolatrous self-worship in the same passage in which he announces the divine limitation on all human ambition, Acts 17.

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God, who made the world and everything in it, since He is Lord of heaven and earth, does not dwell in temples made with hands. Nor is He worshiped with men's hands, as though He needed anything, since He gives to all life, breath, and all things. And He has made from one blood every nation of men to dwell on all the face of the earth, and has determined their preappointed times and the boundaries of their dwellings, so that they should seek the Lord, in the hope that they might grope for Him and find Him, though He is not far from each one of us; for in Him we live and move and have our being, as also some of your own poets have said, 'For we are also His offspring.' Therefore, since we are the offspring of God, we ought not to think that the Divine Nature is like gold or silver or stone, something shaped by art and man's devising. Truly, these times of ignorance God overlooked, but now commands all men everywhere to repent, because He has appointed a day on which He will judge the world in righteousness by the Man whom He has ordained. He has given assurance of this to all by raising Him from the dead.

(Acts 17:24-31)

It has been the common history of the Church since the time of Constantine, to so closely associate herself with the powers as to become the chief defender of the status quo. Dotted along this historical line are the rare instances when the Church was revolutionary, yet even then, after the 'revolution' succeeded, the Church assumed the role of reactionary. The Reformation is a prime example of this phenomenon, as is the earlier development of the Holy Roman Empire. This is, of course, not unique to Christianity, as religion and government are commonly found united in human history. However, for Christianity any union with the earthly powers places the labor of the Church in the service of building the Tower and not the Temple. If we consider this age-old phenomenon as it applies to what Wells refers to as Our Time, we find the evangelical church in the United States exerting tremendous effort to preserve 'our constitutional freedom' against a steadily-encroaching government. Conservative Christians fight to preserve a traditional, family-centered, patriotic vision of 'freedom'; liberal Christians fight to extend 'freedom' to all forms of lifestyles and perversions. Both claim to fight under the banner of 'Democracy.' Hauerwas and Willimon reject such attempts from both sides of the political-religious Christian spectrum.

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We believe both the conservative and liberal church, are basically accommodationist (that is, Constantinian) in their social ethic. Both assume wrongly that the American church's primary social task is to underwrite American democracy.³³⁹

Ignoring for the moment the biblical reality that *all* political systems have a shelf life, including democracy, let us consider where America's form of government and social structure has led us, both from a conservative and from a liberal point of view. From the former perspective, American Christianity has historically been found supporting racism, xenophobia, and militarism. Christian Nationalism, as noted in our previous lesson, is often associated with white supremacist viewpoints and activities, and was largely supportive of the social structure of apartheid in South Africa and Rhodesia (modern Zimbabwe). Militarism is also closely associated with conservative Christianity, with the latter fully in support of the former in pretty much all forms. During the Cold War, for instance, conservative Christianity was solidly in support of alliances with very unsavory dictators in the effort to stem the rising tide of Communism across the globe.

A caveat is necessary here, for many conservative believers reading the previous paragraph will conclude that the 'Christian' thing to do was to let Communism triumph. That is not the only logical conclusion. A more biblical one would be that the Church ought not to have associated herself so closely with the government, so as to keep a safe distance from policies and alliances that were politically necessary, but biblically and morally repugnant. It may have been necessary for the United States to establish and support the dictatorial regime of Augusto Pinoche in Chile, but such a political action should never have found support from American pulpits. War, even Cold War, is inimical to biblical Christianity, but that does not necessarily lead to a doctrine of pacifism. Believers live in two worlds and hold dual citizenship. There are times when the believer, as a citizen of the City of Man, is required in submission to lawful government and in order to protect his 'kith and kin,' as it were, to take up arms. The rightness or wrongness of the cause is not necessarily important, for the believer rests in

³³⁹ Hauerwas & Willimon; 32.

divine providence as the supreme ruler of all nations. But war, and its associated philosophy of militarism, cannot be fundamentally agreeable to one who has been redeemed and incorporated into the Prince of Peace, now a citizen of the City of God. The believer who advocates and pursues militarism fails to comprehend the nature of the New Creation, and ignores the admonition of Paul, *“Repay no one evil for evil. Have regard for good things in the sight of all men. If it is possible, as much as depends on you, live peaceably with all men.”*³⁴⁰

War has always been a troubling concept for believers, though the closer the association between the Church and the State, the easier the Christian conscience has been with regard to war. But war is the diplomacy of the City of Man, not the City of God, as Augustine noted in his famous treatise. That book was written on account of the Sack of Rome by the Visigoths in AD 410, and the consequent fault found with Christianity by the pagans, who considered the collapse of the Imperial City the result the pagan gods offended by the rising tide of Christianity. War has generally been accepted by Christian theologians as a necessary evil in this world, but the heady mixture of patriotism and faith has intoxicated many professing believers into a form of Christian militarism that just cannot be squared with biblical doctrine. This



Algernon S. Crapsey (1847-1927)

phenomenon is not uniquely American, as it was seen with tragic consequences in the 1930s in Germany. But the United States does have a virulent form of Christian militarism, and has had for quite a long time. An article written in 1916, as Europe was embroiled in the Great War, highlights the danger of militarism to American Christianity. Algernon Sidney Crapsey was an Episcopal priest who strongly advocated pacifism as the only proper Christian response to war and militarism. Looking past his pacifist views, however, what he had to say about militarism vis-à-vis the Christian is pertinent

³⁴⁰ Romans 12:17-18

today as it was in his time. Crapsey points out that the first emphasis of militaristic thinking is the reliance upon *physical force*.

The militarist's idea is in direct contradiction to the fundamental postulates of Christian teaching. The military method makes physical force the ultimate means of settling disputes between the different nations. According to this method, each nation must always be prepared to resent injuries. It is to go armed with this in mind all the time. It is as if a private individual were to arm himself upon the supposition that every man in the street is hostile to him and desires his injury, so that he must be ready at every moment of his life to the full extent of his ability to resent such injuries. And he is to resent them by the use of physical force because it is physical force of which he is afraid. This is the fundamental thought of all militarism.³⁴¹

The second essential component of militarism that makes it inimical to Christianity is the necessary component of *enmity*. "We are the natural enemies of other nations and they are our natural foes...It is this principle of natural enmity that is insisted on in season and out of season by those who are preaching military preparedness. Now unless I am mistaken entirely as to the constitution of that great organization known as the Christian Church, this thought of enmity is utterly opposed to all that it stands for."³⁴² Crapsey then quotes Jesus from the Sermon on the Mount, the larger context reading,

You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' But I say to you, love your enemies, bless those who curse you, do good to those who hate you, and pray for those who spitefully use you and persecute you, that you may be sons of your Father in heaven; for He makes His sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust.
(Matthew 5:43-45)

The concept of enmity is indeed contrary to biblical Christianity, as Paul establishes the basis of our faith in the cancelling of enmity both between God and man and between men. As a result of the work of Christ on the cross, the message of His Church is one of *peace*, not enmity.

³⁴¹ Crapsey, Algernon S. "Militarism and the Church" *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, Jul. 1916, Vol. 66; 247.

³⁴² *Ibid.*; 248.

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For He Himself is our peace, who has made both one, and has broken down the middle wall of separation, having abolished in His flesh the enmity, that is, the law of commandments contained in ordinances, so as to create in Himself one new man from the two, thus making peace, and that He might reconcile them both to God in one body through the cross, thereby putting to death the enmity. And He came and preached peace to you who were afar off and to those who were near. For through Him we both have access by one Spirit to the Father. (Ephesians 2:14-18)

The third element of militarism is the necessity to prepare for all possible *evil*, present and future.

There is a third principle at the base of militarism which declares that we must continually prepare against future and contingent evils. Our present preparedness campaign is directed not against actualities but only against remote probabilities which are in fact hardly more than mere possibilities. Now there is no thought more wasteful of human energy than this, and it is a thought utterly condemned by the teaching of Christianity. The Founder of Christianity said, 'Take no thought for the morrow, the morrow shall take thought for the things of itself, sufficient unto the day is the evil thereof.'³⁴³

This comment does show the confusion so common within Christianity between what the *Church* ought to do and what the *State* must do with regard to national safety. Yet it also is historically evident – not least by the war that was raging when this article



Carl von Clausewitz (1780-1831)

was written – that nations *use* the armies they build, and 'national defense' is often claimed for very offensive operations. The point that should be taken from Crapsey's article is not that believers must embrace pacifism, or even that the Church should preach pacifism, but rather that war and militarism are diametrically opposed to the message of the Gospel, and the Church ought to very carefully guard her words with respect to the conflicts among nations. The antipathy between the Gospel and Militarism should become even more clear when the believer reads the annals and strategies of the military culture. In this genre, the recognized guru was and remains the Prussian officer and military reformer Carl von

³⁴³ *Ibid.*; 249.

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Clausewitz, whose treatise *Vom Kreige* (“On War”) became the standard text in military academies around the world and is still in print today. In this work, von Clausewitz describes the nature of war in no uncertain terms, rejecting all romanticizing of it as well as any denial of its necessity as the ultimate form of international diplomacy.

Now, philanthropists may easily imagine there is a skilful [*sic*] method of disarming and overcoming an enemy without causing great bloodshed, and that this is the proper tendency of the Art of War. However plausible this may appear, still it is an error which must be extirpated; for in such dangerous things as War, the errors which proceed from a spirit of benevolence are the worst. As the use of physical power to the utmost extent by no means excludes the cooperation of the intelligence, it follows that he who uses force unsparingly must obtain a superiority if his adversary uses less vigour in its application. The former then dictates the law to the latter, and both proceed to extremities to which the only limitations are those imposed by the amount of counteracting force on each side. This is the way in which the matter must be viewed, and it is to no purpose, it is even against one’s own interest, to turn away from the consideration of the real nature of the affair because the horror of its elements excites repugnance.³⁴⁴

On War remains a very popular read within Western society, especially in the United States and especially among conservative believers. Militarism often goes hand in hand with patriotism, and is certainly a significant element in nationalism, including Christian nationalism. But von Clausewitz, in describing the necessary qualification of a successful military officer, does not mention (and no one thinks that he would or should) the ‘fruit of the Spirit.’ Those characteristics that contribute to the successful career of a military officer are not coextensive with those characteristics that mark a biblical Christian. In the section titled ‘The Genius for War,’ von Clausewitz describes the character of a successful general, concluding that what is most important is a sense of unity in the mind – a single-mindedness – that must apparently be transcendent even over truth. “Truth alone is but a weak motive of action with men, and hence there is always a great difference between knowing and action, between science and art. The man receives the strongest impulse to action through the feelings, and the most powerful succour, if we may use the expression, through those faculties of heart and mind which

³⁴⁴ von Clausewitz, Carl *On War* (Baltimore: Penguin Books; 1968); 102.

we have considered under the terms of resolution, firmness, perseverance, and force of character.”³⁴⁵

We do not live in the New Earth, but in the Age Between. The New Creation is inaugurated but not yet consummated, and the Church cannot behave either as if it has not been inaugurated (and we are still in the Old Creation) or that the New Creation has been fully realized (and this *is* the New Earth). This means that the ways of the world will rarely be the ways of Jesus Christ, yet the Church must continue to live with integrity and witness in this Old World, the Time Between. The recent history of the Cold War offer many examples and cautionary tales to illustrate the danger of a too-close association between the Church and Militarism, even in its ostensibly benign form of Democracy. Communism was an existential threat to the West and to the way of life attained by the Western Democracies, of that there should be no doubt or denying. Yet it is also true that fear of Communism clouded the judgment of the governing officials – Presidents and Prime Ministers – of the Western Democracies, and the judgment of many evangelicals who vigorously supported those governments. One notable example comes from the well-known Christian magazine, *Christianity Today*, founded by Billy Graham in the mid-1950s as a journalistic vehicle to steady American Christians for the ongoing fight against Communism, both in the world and in the United States. “To its editors and writers, the Cold War was both an American diplomatic and military effort and a Christian crusade against evil. They backed the government’s firm stance against all things Communist because of these beliefs.”³⁴⁶ The seriousness of the world situation from a conservative Christian perspective, was highlighted by a sermon Graham delivered to the Greater Omaha-Council Bluffs Crusade, in which the evangelist maintained that “teenage rebellion, sexuality, and a collapse of law and order endangered the United States,” emphasizing “that this situation paved the way for Communists, who were

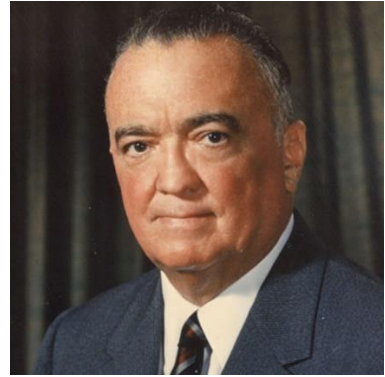
³⁴⁵ *Ibid.*; 157.

³⁴⁶ Settje, David E., 'Christianity and the Cold War, 1964–1968', *Faith and War: How Christians Debated the Cold and Vietnam Wars* (New York, NY, 2011; online edn, NYU Press Scholarship Online, 24 Mar. 2016), p. 28. <https://doi.org/10.18574/nyu/9780814741337.003.0001>, accessed 21 Oct. 2023.

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‘just waiting until we get soft’ with moral standards and anti-Communist vigilance to swoop in and conquer America.”³⁴⁷

Christianity Today has changed dramatically since the days of Billy Graham and the magazine’s first editor, Carl F. H. Henry. It is no longer the voice of conservatism and has embraced the liberal, ‘woke’ agenda pretty much wholesale. The magazine’s transition may be approximately dated to the fall of the Soviet Union, which brought an end to the Cold War that was such a glaring backdrop to the magazine’s origination and agenda. Militarism and an atmosphere of suspicion was advocated and encouraged by the magazine’s editorial staff, including a remarkable guest editorial by the ‘no-one-ever-said-he-was-a-Christian’ head of the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), J. Edgar Hoover. In 1964, Hoover contributed an editorial to *Christianity Today* titled “Faith of Our Fathers.” In this op-ed, the powerful Director of the FBI challenged the magazine’s readers to constant vigilance, for the enemy – Communism – was aggressively seeking the downfall of the West. Hoover wrote,



J. Edgar Hoover (1895-1972)

Let us make no mistake. Communism is an aggressive, dynamic, assertive ideology, claiming to offer, in the words of one of its textbooks, ‘an integral world outlook, the most progressive outlook of our time.’ No man can deny the demonic power of Communism – its lethal wizardry in inciting men to fanaticism, dedication, and allegiance to an ideal, false as that ideal may be; its admitted ability to break down the sinews of civilized nations; its monstrous intention to rewrite all of history in its own self-proclaimed dialectical patterns.³⁴⁸

Hoover does not despair, however, so long as Americans cherish and hold fast the *freedom* secured to them by their fathers – this is the ‘faith’ of which he writes, faith in freedom. Immediately after outlining the intense threat of Communism, Hoover writes, “Yet despite this tremendous energy and this monstrous capacity to enslave men’s minds, hearts, and souls, Communism is inherently weak when compared to the

³⁴⁷ Settje; 23.

³⁴⁸ Hoover, J. Edgar, “The Faith of Our Fathers” *Christianity Today* (September 11, 1964)

explosive power of man's urge to be free. This basic fact Americans so often overlook – that it is the in the faith of our fathers, a trust in God, and a belief in the dignity of man that the real revolutionary power of history arises; and that it is this power that over the centuries has ripped apart tyrannies, overthrown dictators, and humbled the idolatrous."³⁴⁹

To Hoover, and many who continue to agree with his assessment today, our 'spiritual heritage' consists in the dignity of man (a sinner? Whatever Hoover's theology was, it was not Reformed) and the power of freedom. "Truly one of the striking phenomenon of our age is the failure of so many men of good will to trust the historic values of our Western civilization and to believe that freedom is the best way to solve the problems of man and bring in a better world for all."³⁵⁰ To Hoover, the 'power of God unto salvation' is 'freedom,' though one cannot help but wonder what the late director would think of where freedom has taken Western civilization in the half century since his death. Yet even from the remove of so many years, Hoover's rhetoric sounds current to many evangelical pulpits, as he speaks of the flame of freedom: "This flame is the eternal striving of man to be free, to have dignity and respect, to be regarded as a human being."³⁵¹ Hoover's use of evangelical language remains the stock-and-trade of politicians today: "I further believe that despite Communist discipline and indoctrination, this flame can never be permanently extinguished. Why? Because of the image of God in every human being."³⁵² The concluding summary of his editorial could be the rousing close to a contemporary conservative sermon.

Here, in a belief in the power of freedom, lies the strength of America. This is the faith of our fathers, a faith that liberates the energy, vision, and dreams of our people. We need to rededicate ourselves to this faith, to know more about our history and the spirit of freedom...As Americans, we should learn to trust God, to know his teachings, and to live in his ways. Before the eternal majesty of God, the Utopian promises of Communism pale as the murky shadows before the blazing sun. Let us not allow Com-

³⁴⁹ *Idem.*

³⁵⁰ *Idem.*

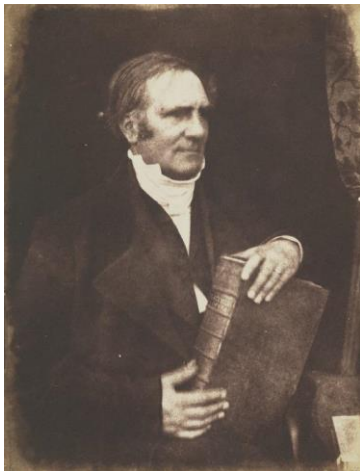
³⁵¹ *Idem.*

³⁵² *Idem.*

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munism to gain a strength it does not deserve. Let us place our hope in the only faith that can move men to the most noble purposes in life, the faith of our fathers.³⁵³

When American evangelicalism enlists the support of men like J. Edgar Hoover, there should be cause for concern and consideration regarding the relationship between the Church and Militarism. If militarism and war are so inimical to biblical Christianity, why do so many evangelicals ardently support a powerful standing army as well as American military involvement in remote parts of the world that have only the most tenuous connection to American security? One reason, certainly, is the realization that military power is *necessary* in the world as it exists under the current regime of the ‘prince of the power of the air.’ As we will see shortly, Christian advocacy of unilateral disarmament and ‘beating swords into plowshares’ is a false utopianism founded on a thoroughly incorrect eschatology. As noted earlier, the biblical response to militarism is not pacifism, but rather the recognition that the believer holds dual citizenship, the challenge once again being walking under the sovereignty that has supremacy – that of the kingdom of Jesus Christ – while living as a citizen of our current age.



Merle d'Aubigne (1794-1872)

Conservative evangelicals have at times (especially during the Cold War) employed the example of Old Testament Israel to advocate and defend Militarism. Look at David, for instance: a ‘*man after God’s heart*’ who was also a powerful and successful warlord. We can also turn to the New Testament and find John the Baptist telling the soldiers who sought his counsel, not to resign their commissions and become farmers, but rather “*Do not intimidate anyone or accuse falsely, and be content with your wages.*”³⁵⁴ Jesus praises the remarkable faith of the centurion (Matthew 8:10), and Paul uses the metaphor of military discipline and obedience (II Timothy 2:3-4). A military career may not be illegitimate, though it remains remarkably inconsistent with the content and meaning of the gospel.

³⁵³ *Idem.*

³⁵⁴ Luke 3:14

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It must be remembered that David, “*a man of blood,*” was not permitted to build the Temple; that was assigned to Solomon, whose name means ‘Peace.’ Merle d’Aubigne, in his biography of Oliver Cromwell, writes, “Cromwell remembered that although a Christian may be sometimes summoned to war, he should at least cast aside all hatred, and ever be inclined towards peace.”³⁵⁵

The other side of the issue of Militarism and War is the pacific viewpoint, embraced by the anabaptists during the Protestant Reformation and by other sects within Western Protestantism since that time. These are the ‘conscientious objectors’ made famous by such more contemporary figures as Sargeant Alvin York (who did fight) and Desmond Doss (who became the only conscientious objector to win the Medal of Honor, as a medic in World War II). Pacifism is today advocated by neo-anabaptists and is the position of Stanley Hauerwas and William Willimon. The logic is, simplistically put, that all forms of violence are acts of war and not peace; because Christians have found peace with God through Jesus Christ, they must by their words and actions advocate for peace within mankind. Hauerwas writes,

I want you to be, like me, a pacifist. As a pacifist I obviously think that war and terrorism are not compatible with Christian discipleship. Yet many Christians think that, though war is terrible, under certain conditions it may not only be justified but a duty. Those that would so justify war for Christians usually assume that terrorism is beyond justification. I will try to show that the attempt to save war as a moral project by distinguishing war from terrorism will not work. In short, if you think terrorism is prohibited, then so is war. Christian non-violence, therefore, cannot help but appear as fanatical just to the extent it challenges the assumed ‘normality’ of war and violence.³⁵⁶

Hauerwas has a point in his opposition to all forms of violence as legitimate life choices for believers. It can be stated as an undeniable truth that the violence of man against man has never wrought the righteousness of God; violence is the device of this world’s system and not of the kingdom of God. “The world of nations has no means of being at peace other than means that are always violent, or at least potentially vio-

³⁵⁵ D’Aubigne, J. H. Merle *The Protector: A Vindication* (Harrisonburg, VA: Sprinkle Publications; 1983); 181.

³⁵⁶ Hauerwas in *The Church as Counterculture*; 90.

lent.”³⁵⁷ But in a seeming ironic twist to the traditional pacifist manifesto, Hauerwas and Willimon are not peace activists, either, at least not in the usual sense of that vocation.

Christians, we have been told recently, should work for peace. But what good is a peace movement that works for peace for the same idolatrous reasons we build bombs – namely, the anxious self-interested protection of our world as it is? Christians are free to work for peace in a nonviolent, hopeful way because we already know something about the end. We do not argue that the bomb is the worst thing humanity can do to itself. We have already done the worst thing we could do when we hung [*sic*] God’s Son on a cross. We do not argue that we must do something about the bomb or else we shall obliterate our civilization, because God has already obliterated our civilization in the life, teaching, death, and resurrection of Jesus. We do not argue against the bomb under the supposition that our millions we now spend for bombs will then be spent on food for the hungry. Apparently, peace sustained by necessarily larger, non-nuclear armies will be more expensive than nuclear peace is now...Nor do we argue for peace because, if we do not get peace, we have no hope. Our hope is based not on Caesar’s missiles or Caesar’s treaties but on the name of the Lord who made heaven and earth. People often work for peace out of the same anxieties and perverted views of reality that lead people to build bombs.³⁵⁸

This paragraph highlights the reality that the motives and results of the world system are seldom pure and even less seldom godly. It illustrates the fact that believers can join in with the world – either through militarism or through pacificism – for illegitimate reasons and unbiblical goals. To ‘protect the American way of life’ is laudable in terms of the prosperity and comfort most Americans enjoy, to say nothing of the amazing personal freedom and freedom of worship that we have, but it can hardly be considered a viable goal for the Church of Jesus Christ. Democracy and Capitalism have their worldly benefits, but as we shall see in the next lesson they also have a definite Dark Side, reminding us that both are still characteristics of this age which is passing away, and not are not essential to the kingdom of Christ. Hauerwas and Willimon take aim at the popular adage, “The only thing necessary for evil to triumph is for good people to do nothing.” From a Christian perspective, this statement is wrong on many

³⁵⁷ *Resident Aliens*; 89.

³⁵⁸ *Ibid.*; 89-90.

levels. First, there are no ‘good people’ in the world, only sinners who either abide under the wrath of God or within the grace of God through Jesus Christ. Fundamental biblical anthropology ought to teach us to view any governmental or social activity with suspicion and doubt. One need only remember that Paul brings all men before the bar of God’s righteousness, and condemns all men in sin. “*Now we know that whatever the law says, it says to those who are under the law, that every mouth may be stopped, and all the world may become guilty before God.*”³⁵⁹

A second error of the phrase is that it is historically inaccurate: evil has triumphed in human history in spite of the efforts of, let us say, ‘better minded’ people. Adolf Hitler rose to power in spite of the attempts of the German Roman Catholic Church and the German Confessing Church to stop him (and in spite of several attempts to assassinate him), wreaking a devastation on the world that will be long remembered. It may be argued that the adage only means that ‘good people’ cannot simply stand by, doing nothing, when evil advances. Perhaps this is true, but the success rate attributed to ‘good people’ doing ‘something’ is grossly over-estimated.

Finally, and by far most importantly for the believer, is the biblical fact that ‘good people’ will have *absolutely no* impact on the eventual destruction of evil. In fact, evil *has already* been defeated proleptically and judicially by the finished work of Jesus Christ on the cross. The powers and principalities that stand behind the worldly powers that make war and perpetrate evil throughout history, have been defeated by Christ in the cross. This is the reality that Paul so earnestly wants believers to know, to fully and deeply comprehend, because this is the reality of the New Creation and the New Humanity, the new citizenship that all believers now possess by grace in Jesus Christ. The world will go on ‘passing away’ with each new generation, until the *Parousia*. The Church, however, is the New Temple of living stones being built through the preaching of the gospel on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus being the chief cornerstone. Consider again the several key places where Paul speaks of this wholly new paradigm in which all believers now live in Christ.

³⁵⁹ Romans 3:19

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Therefore I also, after I heard of your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love for all the saints, do not cease to give thanks for you, making mention of you in my prayers: that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give to you the spirit of wisdom and revelation in the knowledge of Him, the eyes of your understanding being enlightened; that you may know what is the hope of His calling, what are the riches of the glory of His inheritance in the saints, and what is the exceeding greatness of His power toward us who believe, according to the working of His mighty power which He worked in Christ when He raised Him from the dead and seated Him at His right hand in the heavenly places, far above all principality and power and might and dominion, and every name that is named, not only in this age but also in that which is to come. And He put all things under His feet, and gave Him to be head over all things to the church, which is His body, the fullness of Him who fills all in all. (Ephesians 1:15-22)

And you, being dead in your trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, He has made alive together with Him, having forgiven you all trespasses, having wiped out the handwriting of requirements that was against us, which was contrary to us. And He has taken it out of the way, having nailed it to the cross. Having disarmed principalities and powers, He made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them in it. (Colossians 2:13-15)

Now, therefore, you are no longer strangers and foreigners, but fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, having been built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ Himself being the chief cornerstone, in whom the whole building, being fitted together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord, in whom you also are being built together for a dwelling place of God in the Spirit. (Ephesians 2:19-22)

For He must reign till He has put all enemies under His feet. The last enemy that will be destroyed is death. For "He has put all things under His feet." But when He says "all things are put under Him," it is evident that He who put all things under Him is excepted. Now when all things are made subject to Him, then the Son Himself will also be subject to Him who put all things under Him, that God may be all in all. (I Corinthians 15:25-28)

The prophetic voice of the Church is neither Militarism nor Pacifism. The former is ruled out by the very nature of human enmity and distrust lying at the root of Militarism, but the latter is also negated by the fact that the current world order still remains, and operates (as the believer should know) under the providential supervision of God. The world continues to build its Temple; the Lord is building His Temple. From that Temple, believers continue to witness to the *New Earth* and the *New Humanity*, where the social distinctions and animosities that fuel War are put to death in the cross.

Lesson 14 – A Voice in the Wilderness
Text: II Corinthians 8 - 10; Ephesians 2:10-22

*“Jesus has succeeded in creating a new society,
in fact a new humanity,
in which alienation has given way to reconciliation,
and hostility to peace.”*
(John R. W. Stott)

In one of the most famous exchanges in the Bible, Jesus rebukes His lead disciple Peter – whom He had only moments before declared blessed because of his recognition of Jesus as the Son of God – by strongly insinuating that Peter was being led by Satan: *“But He turned and said to Peter, ‘Get behind Me, Satan! You are an offense to Me, for you are not mindful of the things of God, but the things of men.’”*³⁶⁰ What is even more intriguing than Jesus’ connection between Peter and Satan, is His comment regarding Satan being *mindful of...the things of men*. This, on the face of it, seems to credit Satan with being concerned with the human race, a conclusion we know cannot be right. Satan’s interest in men cannot be for their good, any more in Jesus’ day than it was in Adam’s, when the serpent connived and deceived Man into his primordial rebellion. What Jesus must mean here in Matthew 16, is that Satan’s interest in *the things of men* is for their destruction, which is no less than what the devil has been strategizing against mankind since the Fall of Adam. Preventing Jesus’ journey to the cross, as Peter tries to do in this narrative, only serves *the things of men* in their rebellion, establishing Man in his sin just as the Tower of Babel attempted to do.

Qohelet assures us that *“there is nothing new under the sun”* and certainly this applies to the stratagem of Satan. Paul writes, *“we are not ignorant of his devices”*³⁶¹ and the exchange between Jesus and Peter (Satan) should be a constant reminder of the devil’s leading tactic: to unite Man against God, thus assuring Man’s ultimate destruction. This was the underlying power at work in Genesis 11 and the building of the Tower; this has been the methodology of Satan throughout history up to the present day. The ‘One World Order,’ the ‘Illuminati’ and other conspiracy theories, the modern focus on

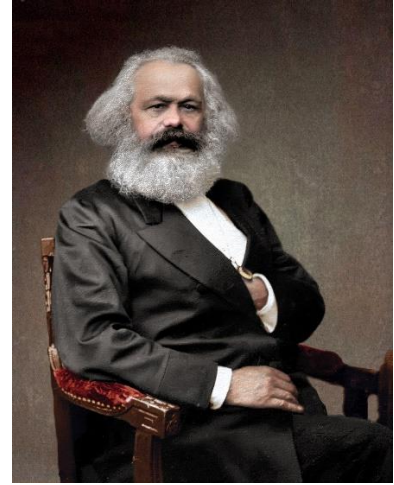
³⁶⁰ Matthew 16:23

³⁶¹ II Corinthians 2:11

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‘wokeness,’ are all of the same cloth, but we are aware of Satan’s devices. The Church need not be versed in every version of satanic deception to be able to recognize one when it appears, and that is the perennial wisdom of the sons of Issachar, knowing the times and what the Church should do in them.

Throughout history, the devil has continued to attempt to further his agenda against the inexorable plan of God. This is the true ‘conspiracy’ amidst the many theories that come and go: the prince of the power of the air goes to and fro about the earth, *“seeking whom he may devour.”* At times, it seems, he latches on to an especially useful vessel in his diabolism, and the 19th Century German social philosopher Karl Marx was certainly such a man, and such an instrument. The significance of such men



Karl Marx (1818-83)

is their ability to develop an abiding philosophy, justification, or epistemology of unbelief. Immanuel Kant ranks among their number, as does Charles Darwin. For Marx, the issue was the social order, and his contribution to the devil’s work toward the enslavement and destruction of Man was, of course, the foundation of the economic and social system known as Communism. Marx sowed the seeds of social animosity and destruction through his preaching on the evils of class distinction, and his distillation of all human problems to class warfare. To be sure, Marx claimed that the oppressive economic system of Capitalism would eventually destroy itself, and his Hegelian philosophy yielded the ultimate deliverance of the proletariat into the ‘new earth’ of a classless society.

Marxism appeared to have the downtrodden of humanity at heart, but therein lies the satanic deception of such godless worldviews and philosophies. Where applied, Marxism destroys human thought, human freedom, and certainly human devotion to God. Godless Communist states such as Russian, China, and Cuba are undeniable proof of the diabolical reality of Marx’ and similar theories. But the point is that *they sound like they are ‘for man’ when in fact they only seek man’s destruction.* Marxist Communism, Dar-

winian Evolution, Kantian Idealism, are all nothing more than modern iterations of the ageless scheme of Satan to ‘unite mankind’ in a godless society, to consummate human rebellion fully and finally. Each, in its turn, has been proven false. But they do not disappear; they simply mutate into different forms. “Intelligent Design” arises to entice believers to incorporate evolutionary science into Christian faith. ‘Situational Ethics’ attempts to justify selfish motives with a philosophical veneer. And Marxism – all but humiliated by the failure of the Soviet Union and the ongoing poverty of Cuba and totalitarian statism of China – reincarnates itself in the West as Liberation Theology, Feminist Theology, and the most recent, Critical Race Theory and ‘wokeism.’

Each manifestation of the devil’s deception has occupied the Church in efforts to refute and defend, drawing her attention away from her mission and purpose. One of the problems is that the Church fails to see that this or that manifestation of godlessness is just that, a manifestation of the devil’s timeless attempts to unite mankind in rebellion against God, and in mankind’s own destruction. In each and every case, the Church has mistaken the signs of demonic influence and has toyed with and even embraced the error, further diluting her own positive influence in the world, if not destroying her witness altogether. So it continues in the modern crisis of wokeism as individual congregations and entire denominations are embracing Critical Race Theory (CRT), movements like Black Lives Matter and the LGTBQ militancy, socialist agendas, Ecumenicism, and incorporating ‘woke’ terminology into their preaching and teaching. The ultimate failure in each case is the abandonment of Truth, the exchanging of the *truth as it is in Jesus Christ* for the latest version of the lie.

But within the Church and in each generational iteration of this liberalizing process, there has always also been a large segment of traditionalists; conservatives who vigorously, but uncritically, defend the *status quo* and unthinkingly condemn all statements and propositions that arise from the *critique du jour*. This is not to say that the Church ought ever to entertain theories or propositions that are, at heart, godless. It is imperative that the Church seek the wisdom of God to know the root epistemology of ever ‘system’ or movement, whether it be of God or of the devil. If the latter, it must be

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rejected wholesale, for it can contain nothing but lies. Still, there is a concept derived from the prophecy of Jeremiah of *'extracting the precious from the vile,'* that recognizes that no human system – social, political, or economic – is free from the taint of human sin. In each generational situation, then, the Church occupies the place of Israel in the prophecy,

Therefore thus says the LORD:

"If you return, then I will bring you back;

You shall stand before Me; if you take out the precious from the vile,

You shall be as My mouth.

Let them return to you, but you must not return to them.

And I will make you to this people a fortified bronze wall;

And they will fight against you, but they shall not prevail against you;

For I am with you to save you and deliver you," says the LORD.

"I will deliver you from the hand of the wicked,

And I will redeem you from the grip of the terrible."

(Jeremiah 15:19-21)

By *extracting the precious from the vile,* the Church in any generation may be convicted of real sins and may recognize areas of necessary repentance and improvement without embracing false doctrines or demonic social movements. The chief power of a lie is its approximation or incorporation of truth; it is the duty of the Church and of the believer to seek the truth and reject the lie. This does not by any means require a thorough study of each and every particular system of lies perpetrated by Satan on any given generation of humanity; that is all too often what the Church has attempted to do and it has proven to be a dangerous diversion. Rather the Church's response in the face of the latest godless human philosophy or worldview, is to pray as the psalmist does,

Search me, O God, and know my heart; try me, and know my anxieties;

And see if there is any wicked way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting.

(Psalm 139:23-24)

Recognizing the demonic deception within the latest iteration of the lie is also not the same as mindlessly advocating the current world system being attacked. In other words, to combat Socialism one does not have to slavishly advocate for Capitalism; to

refute Black Lives Matter one need not (and must not) become racist or a white supremacist. This common reactionary response to false philosophies and social movements is itself a victory for Satan, who does not need to convince people that his lie is the truth, so long as he can get them to adopt another lie as the truth – and all human systems are, to greater or lesser extent, founded on ‘the lie.’³⁶² We recognize, or should recognize, that the development of any philosophy, thought system, or social movement is wholly within the providence of God; nothing occurs outside His knowledge and will. The ultimate example of this truth is, of course, the crucifixion, which occurred “*at the hands of lawless men*” but was nonetheless in full accord with “*the determined purpose and foreknowledge of God.*”³⁶³ Thus, we can safely assume, that every lesser act of the evil one contains within it some aspect of the divine purpose.

This is the ‘precious’ the Church must extract from the vile. This is not to say that we will be able to decipher providence; that is something countless men have attempted over countless generations, with consistent and sometimes phenomenal failure. Wells comments, “God’s government of the world is often morally opaque from our perspective, and it will be so until the final day.”³⁶⁴ The firm foundation of both hope and comfort for believers and the Church is the sure knowledge that God “*ordains whatsoever comes to pass,*” as the Westminster Confession of Faith puts it. This, we know, includes all actions of human agents that are tangibly and undeniably evil, though we rarely know how it is that God uses these acts for His good and glory.

While the metaphysics of God’s purposes in the world are everywhere assumed in the Bible and everywhere acted upon, they are rarely the object of explicit examination. Even in the most troubling instances in which evil seems to be caught up at the fringes of God’s actions, this remains the case. Evil is never treated, in these instances, as less than evil, and it is subject to God’s judgments as such, but it is nevertheless seen as living out its life only by God’s will, only within the boundaries that his providence prescribes, and, in the end, only as it serves his purposes.³⁶⁵

³⁶² Romans 1:25

³⁶³ Acts 2:23

³⁶⁴ Wells, *God in the Wasteland*; 124-125.

³⁶⁵ *Ibid.*; 165.

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What believers must consider at all times, and in spite of the sometimes intense sense of failure and hopelessness in the world, is the biblical reality both of Jesus' finished work on the cross and the promise of ultimate consummation of that work on the basis of the resurrection. For Paul, the resurrection validated the entire ministry of Jesus (Acts 17:31), but it also grounded the believer's hope in the ultimate restoration of all things in accordance with the divine purpose. We remember that Paul's significant eschatological treatise in I Corinthians 15 is itself a response by the apostle against those who were claiming that the resurrection had already occurred, that it was a 'spiritual' resurrection and not a bodily one. If this were true, Paul writes, "*then we are of all men the most pitiable*"³⁶⁶ It is in this context that the apostle launches into his fullest exposition of the overall plan of God from the resurrection of Jesus to the consummation of the ages.

But now Christ is risen from the dead, and has become the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep. For since by man came death, by Man also came the resurrection of the dead. For as in Adam all die, even so in Christ all shall be made alive. But each one in his own order: Christ the firstfruits, afterward those who are Christ's at His coming. Then comes the end, when He delivers the kingdom to God the Father, when He puts an end to all rule and all authority and power. For He must reign till He has put all enemies under His feet. The last enemy that will be destroyed is death. For "He has put all things under His feet." But when He says "all things are put under Him," it is evident that He who put all things under Him is excepted. Now when all things are made subject to Him, then the Son Himself will also be subject to Him who put all things under Him, that God may be all in all. (I Corinthians 15:20-28)

This passage intersects with our study of the Church in the World at the point noted in verse 24, that Christ will *put an end to all rule and all authority and power*. These are the 'powers and principalities' that Christ defeated on the cross, the same that govern behind the scenes of the worldly powers and tower-building efforts of the nations. These powers are ultimately infused with that spirit of rebellion against God that was first found in the '*god of this age,*' Satan, and as we saw in the last lesson, their only aim is to unify mankind in rebellion against God. But in this they will fail, and that is the

³⁶⁶ I Corinthians 15:19b

Church's sure foundation when dealing with the world and culture in which she is placed. So, it is not important, and even not desirable, that the Church be able to explain 'what God is doing' in this or that situation, and especially not to attempt to link current events with biblical prophecy or eschatology. What is important and necessary is for the Church to be the people of hope, not that the world will somehow, someday sort itself out, nor the hope that the status quo will be preserved or that some halcyon days of yore will be recovered. Rather, the hope that is firmly grounded in the finished work of Jesus Christ, in whom all of the promises of God are 'Yes' and 'Amen.'³⁶⁷ This hope, that does not and cannot disappoint, is the fruit of faith; there is no other source.

Therefore, having been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom also we have access by faith into this grace in which we stand, and rejoice in hope of the glory of God. And not only that, but we also glory in tribulations, knowing that tribulation produces perseverance; and perseverance, character; and character, hope. Now hope does not disappoint, because the love of God has been poured out in our hearts by the Holy Spirit who was given to us. (Romans 5:1-5)

Not only do believers know how everything turns out, we also know what the fundamental problem is with the unbelieving world. In a word: **alienation**. Unbelievers recognize this malady; Marx preached the alienation of the proletariat by the capitalist bourgeoisie. Modern Critical Race Theory, wokeness, and movements like Feminism and Black Lives Matter are essentially about alienation. The reason these philosophies find an audience is because the alienation they highlight is real, painful, and often systemic. But the problem with the unbelieving perspective is that it consistently and necessarily fails to see the underlying alienation *from God* that is both the ground for all human alienation and the only real precursor to that horizontal alienation being ultimately resolved. Thus the 'solution' offered by these unbelieving and sometimes godless theories is self-consciously deconstructive: the goal is to tear down society, destroy social norms, structures, and relationships that are viewed as the cause and continuation of the alienation being addressed. On the other side, however, conservative Chris-

³⁶⁷ II Corinthians 1:20

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tians often respond by denying that the alienation is real or that it is a problem. Thus the two sides square off against each other, with neither impacting the other.

As believers, we must both recognize and accept that alienation from God makes alienation between men inevitable. It is not an insignificant fact of biblical revelation that the first post-Fall sin recorded is that of murder. Of course, one might argue that the sin that led to that murder was covetousness, but that is no less a characteristic of human alienation than murder is. For the apostle Paul, the ultimate manifestation of alienation within the human race was that of the Gentiles vis-à-vis the Jews, and particularly the Jewish Covenant. He often speaks of the Gentiles as those who are graciously brought into the covenant, grafted into the olive tree, joined together with the Jews as the hereditary heirs of the covenant. Nowhere is this clearer than in Ephesians 2.

Protestants turn to this passage for its classic verse 8, *“For it is by grace you have been saved through faith...”* and this is indeed a very significant verse and passage with regard to Soteriology, the doctrine of salvation. Paul first and firmly establishes the condition of all men who are outside of Jesus Christ: *dead in trespass and sin*. He also, as the Reformed understanding affirms, credits the regeneration of the dead sinner entirely to God as a *monergistic* work of divine grace. This is so important to the apostle that he repeats it twice in the opening paragraph of the chapter.

And you He made alive, who were dead in trespasses and sins, in which you once walked according to the course of this world, according to the prince of the power of the air, the spirit who now works in the sons of disobedience, among whom also we all once conducted ourselves in the lusts of our flesh, fulfilling the desires of the flesh and of the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, just as the others. But God, who is rich in mercy, because of His great love with which He loved us, even when we were dead in trespasses, made us alive together with Christ (by grace you have been saved), and raised us up together, and made us sit together in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, that in the ages to come He might show the exceeding riches of His grace in His kindness toward us in Christ Jesus. For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God, not of works, lest anyone should boast.

(Ephesians 2:1-9)

The individualist tendency of the modern setting results in the majority of emphasis being placed on this passage rather than that which follows. But it should be ev-

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ident by now that Paul knew of no such thing as a private, individualistic faith. We are, as he says, *baptized into one body*, and that is the Body of Christ, the Church. Therefore, the apostle immediately segues into the impact of this gracious, resurrecting salvation on the alienation that exists within mankind on account of sin. Again, we note that he argues *a fortiori* (from the stronger) by showing how the greatest alienation within the human race up to that point – that between those who were in the covenant and those who were not – is fully resolved in Christ. The logic of the argument, then, demands that if this greater alienation is removed, no lesser alienation (such as ethnicity, socio-economic condition, or gender) can stand.

Therefore remember that you, once Gentiles in the flesh – who are called Uncircumcision by what is called the Circumcision made in the flesh by hands – that at that time you were without Christ, being aliens from the commonwealth of Israel and strangers from the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world. But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. For He Himself is our peace, who has made both one, and has broken down the middle wall of separation, having abolished in His flesh the enmity, that is, the law of commandments contained in ordinances, so as to create in Himself one new man from the two, thus making peace, and that He might reconcile them both to God in one body through the cross, thereby putting to death the enmity. And He came and preached peace to you who were afar off and to those who were near. For through Him we both have access by one Spirit to the Father. (Ephesians 2:11-18)

“*Having no hope and without God in the world.*” That is the most concise statement of the human condition ever written by any philosopher or theologian, yet too many believers, and too often the Church, have failed to view the unbelieving world in this true light. Alienation is first and foremost a condition that subsists between fallen Man and God, and only secondarily, and consequently, a condition between the various tribes of the human race. The Church’s response to the various movements throughout history has too often focused on the truth content of the claims of alienation without remembering that the condition *du jour* – be it slavery, economic oppression, serfdom or economic indenture, white supremacy and colonialism, or male chauvinism – are the *products*, not the causes, of the human condition alienated from God through sin. No attempt to solve the horizontal alienation can even hope to succeed, or frankly even to

make progress, without peace and communion being first established between man and God, and this can only be done through the gracious regenerative work of the Holy Spirit through faith in Jesus Christ.

Those who begin with the human perspective inevitably end with the human perspective. We must begin with *God*, for only in this way will we end with the divine perspective...We must begin by reading the meaning of the world from the revelation of God's purpose in Scripture; we must not begin by attempting to read it from the text of the world's life.³⁶⁸

Here we touch upon the most dramatic and radical aspect of divine salvation as Paul knows and teaches it. In spite of the fact that our modern, individualistic *zeitgeist* puts the spotlight on the "alive from the dead" aspect of salvation, Paul would not leave out the "one new man" of the regenerated community of faith, the Church. It would surprise many professing Christians to learn that the divine purpose of redemptive history was not merely so that they could, as an individual sinner, get to heaven when they die. Rather it was the purpose of God, fulfilled in Christ Jesus and applied by the Holy Spirit, to create a new humanity, as unified in Jesus Christ as the old one was in Adam, only without the taint and corruption of the latter's sin. This aspect of Christ's work on the cross and from the empty tomb forms the foundation of Paul's consequent understanding of all human relationships for those who are 'in Him.' If the covenantal distinctions between Jew and Gentile can no longer hold, no other distinction can hold either.

However, a caveat is in order here that is also integral to the apostle's teaching. The interpersonal relationship differentials that prevail in the world *still exist*, they just no longer have any significance in the Church. Hence the wife remains submissive to her husband, though she is of equal status with him in Christ; the slave continues to submit to his master, though there is no distinction between the two in Christ. This is an important consideration in the current situation of Critical Race Theory and 'wokeness,' as the apparent utopia that advocates of such theories and movements seem to be pushing does approximate the sinless perfection of the consummated Kingdom. In other

³⁶⁸ Wells, *God in the Wasteland*; 162.

words, there are grains of truth in every lie. For the believer, awareness of the ‘now and not yet’ aspect of the current Time Between prevents him or her from expecting perfection on earth this side of the *Parousia*. But it must never stop the believer from both desiring and pursuing that perfection, both within his own life and within the Church. “That perfect society, the fully accepted and accomplished rule of God in men’s hearts, therefore is the object of a Christian’s hope and longing.”³⁶⁹ By witness and natural, societal interaction, this pursuit of the eschatological perfection will ‘rub off’ to some extent; life in that part of the world that most closely interfaces Christianity, will itself be improved. This is an undeniable lesson of history since that first Christian Pentecost. David Wells concludes that the Cross, particularly and uniquely, becomes the crux of all interpretation of the times, all analyses of providence.

The cross, then, is the place where God’s providence is most importantly interpreted, because that providence is centrally moral in its nature, and the world’s offenses are decisively confronted in the cross. The cross is the revelation of God’s love and his holiness, and as such it gives us important insights into those aspects of the doctrine of providence that otherwise seem so problematic...The church knows that God’s reign or kingdom was inaugurated in the ministry and death of Christ; it now anxiously awaits the consummation of this reign at his return. The church lives in the time between the two comings of Christ, the first in grace and the second in glory, one in lowliness and one in majesty, one that ended in shame on the cross and the other that will be bright with glory on the clouds of heaven. And it is here, in these comings, that God’s own theodicy is laid out for us.³⁷⁰

Case Study: Philemon

Paul’s short letter to Philemon is an important case study on the matter of social conditions relative to the community of faith. The letter is written in accompaniment to the return of Onesimus, a slave of Philemon who apparently escaped. Having encountered Paul while on the run, Onesimus was regenerated through faith in the gospel of Jesus Christ. Yet Paul did not thereby conclude that Onesimus was no longer the property of Philemon. This is significant considering the apostle’s teaching in II Corinthians

³⁶⁹ Newbiggin; *Signs*; 50.

³⁷⁰ *Ibid.*; 170-71.

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5, that *“if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; old things have passed away; behold, all things have become new.”*³⁷¹ It would have been logical, we might assume, for Paul to view Onesimus as not only free in Christ, but also free from his former enslavement; this Paul did not do. He returns Onesimus to Philemon, writing, *“without your consent I did not want to do anything, that your goodness should not be as it were by compulsion, but of your own free will.”*³⁷² This response is consistent, really, with what Paul says, also in Corinthians, regarding one’s worldly status when converted: remain in it, but change it if it becomes possible (*cp.* I Cor. 7:20-21).

Thus we see that the advent of the gospel does not immediately have this world’s inequities and injustices in mind; it is not first directed at the alienation among men, but rather that alienation that stands against every man in the presence of God. But the resolution of this vertical alienation cannot help but impact the horizontal. Onesimus is returned to Philemon as the slave who ran away, yet no longer as the slave who ran away. *“For perhaps he was for this reason parted from you for a while, that you should have him back forever, no longer as a slave, but more than a slave, a beloved brother.”*³⁷³ Onesimus has joined the same gracious family of which Philemon was a part (and Paul does point out that Philemon’s redemption was through his ministry). The relationship between master and slave is now subsumed under the relationship of each to the Lord Jesus Christ. *“What matters is the primary relation to the Lord. That relativizes all other relations. In relation to the Lord the slave is a free person and the freeman is a slave.”*³⁷⁴ Yet this new relationship does not force Philemon to free Onesimus, though it puts the master/slave paradigm into a whole new perspective, as it does with *all* human relationships. Paul never demands that Philemon free Onesimus and allow the former slave to return to him as an assistant, but it is fairly clear that this is what the apostle desires. This is just one example of how Paul both *did not* consider the gospel to necessarily change existing social structures, and *did* expect that the spirit of the gospel could not

³⁷¹ II Corinthians 5:17

³⁷² Philemon 14

³⁷³ Philemon 15-16a

³⁷⁴ Dunn, *Theology of Paul*; 699-700.

help but do so. With reference to slavery, Dunn writes, “And, above all, the repeated references to the primary relationship to the Lord (for both slave and free) highlights a fundamental criterion of human relationships which in the longer term was bound to undermine the institution of slavery itself.”³⁷⁵

This comment leads naturally to a brief overview of history, particularly the history of the nations impacted most pervasively by Christianity over the past two thousand (and especially the past five hundred) years. It is an undeniable fact of this history that the advent of Christianity did not immediately remove all societal ills and evils – slavery existed for millennia, economic oppression still exists in large measure, and ethnic discrimination is an ever-present reality. But it is also undeniable that each of these evils, and others including infant mortality, literacy, and basic human freedoms, have been greatly ameliorated in lands impacted by Christianity and influenced by the Church of Jesus Christ. The modern demand for reparations, for instance, with regard to the descendants of slaves in the United States, is a tacit admission that slavery no longer exists and the fact that it no longer exists (at least not in its chattel form of antebellum America) is due largely to the societal and moral impact of Christianity. The nations who once profited either by slavery directly or by the slave trade, now vigorously pursue the eradication of human trafficking all over the globe. The evils of society have not been eradicated, but it does no harm and is far closer to truth to at least acknowledge the impact of evangelicalism on mitigating those evils even among people who make no profession of faith in Jesus Christ. Christianity is a *liberating* faith; it stands to reason that freedom and liberty would be found in its wake.

Yet it would be a mistake to conclude that changing societal relationships and eradicating societal ills and evils is the *purpose* of the Church in the world. Indeed, whenever the Church has taken this burden upon itself, whether in the Social Gospel movement of the 19th Century, or contemporary ‘woke’ preaching and Black Lives Matter rallies, it has lowered its sights to that of the world: the eradication of human alienation without the prior necessary removal of the alienation between man and God. In

³⁷⁵ *Ibid.*; 701.

short, it inevitably abandons the gospel that alone can (eventually) successfully achieve the stated social goal(s). What is tragic about this alliance between the Church and social activism is that the latter is almost always destructive, not constructive. Well-meaning though they may be (and it is not for us to determine this), the common element of all social *reconstructive* movements is first to *deconstruct* what exists, to tear down ostensibly to then rebuild – but rebuilding never happens. This common denominator of all such movements has become ever more apparent in the contemporary iterations: Marxism, Feminism, Liberation Theology, and now Critical Race Theory and woke ideology. Owen Strachan, in his *Christianity and Wokeness*, writes summarily, “In this system, there is no grace and no love. There is only grievance, resentment, and condemnation.”³⁷⁶

Reading commentaries and social-impact books from previous generations – from a Christian perspective, of course – illustrates how often the Church gets down in the weeds with its particular time. Controversies are defined and biblical Christianity defended in relation to circumstances, events, and movements that are thoroughly unfamiliar to the current reader. Thus it will probably be in a few generations (or less) with regard to Critical Race Theory, itself the primary ‘philosophical’ expression of ‘wokeness.’ The term ‘woke’ means being “‘awake’ to the true nature of the world when so many are asleep. In the most specific terms, this means one sees the comprehensive inequity of our social order and strives to highlight power structures in society that stem from racial privilege.”³⁷⁷ This the social-political expression of Critical Race Theory (CRT), which is itself little more than a repackaging of Marxism, with race substituted for economics, and white people for capitalists, in the overall scheme of social analysis. “CRT teaches that all of societal life is structured along racial power dynamics.”³⁷⁸ As with Marx, the modern proponents of CRT are seeking nothing less than the complete overthrow of ‘current’ power structures – meaning whites – in order not to bring ‘balance,’ but, frankly, retribution. Strachan writes,

³⁷⁶ Strachan, Owen *Christianity and Wokeness* (Washington, DC: Salem Books; 2021); 1.

³⁷⁷ *Ibid.*; 8.

³⁷⁸ *Idem.*

In America, the argument goes, common people are not leading lives of quiet dignity; they are either oppressing others or being oppressed. Inequality rules the social order just as it rules the economic order. In CRT, life is a zero-sum game. Some win; most lose. Guilty people – ‘white’ people – can only embrace personal negation and perform ritual works...Rest assured that woke ideology is not made for classrooms. It is made for revolutions.³⁷⁹

Strachan points out how similar this all sounds to Marxist dogma.

The history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles. Freeman and slave, patrician and plebeian, lord and serf, guild-master and journeyman, in a word, oppressor and oppressed, stood in constant opposition to one another, carried on an un-interrupted, now hidden, now open fight, a fight that each time ended, either in a revolutionary reconstitution of society at large, or in the common ruin of the contending classes.³⁸⁰

The similarities between modern CRT/woke ideology and 19th Century Communist dogma cannot be missed. Many Christians were enticed by Communism in the era of Marx and Engels, recognizing correctly that there were indeed economic inequities within Western, Capitalistic societies. Wage earners were oppressed, in some cases no less enslaved to the mill or mine than Southern American blacks were enslaved to the plantation. Knowing that all injustice is an affront to God (*cp.* Micha 6:8, probably from memory), many denominations and many individual believers threw in their lot with Communism, some even supporting it well beyond the evidence of even more horrid oppression behind the Iron Curtain and in Communist China. Today, likewise, many believers see the reality of racial prejudice and inequity, and consequently adopt the ideology of Critical Race Theory; they become ‘woke.’ But the modern iteration of the old ideology is no less deconstructive, no less destructive; CRT tears down, it does not build up. “The case made by woke ideology is in no way unifying. Instead, the synthesis of the past with the ‘oppression’ of the present ends up not defeating those past

³⁷⁹ *Ibid.*; 14.

³⁸⁰ Marx, Karl and Friedrich Engels, *The Communist Manifesto*. [Manifesto of the Communist Party \(marxists.org\)](https://www.marxists.org); 28. Accessed 30October2023.

evils, but resuscitating resentment, victimhood, and societal leveling. Such a program will yield division, not healing.”³⁸¹

Believers should note the phrasing of the excerpt quoted above from the Communist Manifesto. Do the social couplets not echo Paul? There was inequity and oppression in Paul’s day (Marx refers directly to Roman society in this section of the Manifesto), and class-structure and struggle in all human societies before and after. As noted earlier, there is no solution to this problem apart from the forgiveness of sins through faith in Jesus Christ, and no society on earth that can begin to approximate justice and equity other than the Church. But denial of inequity and injustice is not a proper response by the Church, for in doing so it merely become the defender of the *status quo* and not the ‘voice crying in the wilderness.’ Thus whether the Church adopts woke ideology, or the Church vehemently denies the validity of manifestations of inequity and injustice in society, it loses its prophetic voice entirely. In the one case, the Church so thoroughly adopts the voice of the ‘victim’ that it has nothing to offer but commiseration; in the other case, the Church perpetuates inequity and injustice by denying its existence either in the past or in the present. Neither can be the true response, the prophetic response, of the Church.

Strachan notes that the Church’s response to any such ideology – whether Marxist Communism or CRT/wokeness – is always the same: “To a watching world that asks us what our answer is for alienation and hostility, we say two things: (1) the cross, and (2) the Church.”³⁸² As we saw from Ephesians, and as is so pervasive throughout Paul’s writings, God is reconciling the world to Himself through the cross, and He has entrusted to His people, the Church, this ministry of reconciliation.

Now all things are of God, who has reconciled us to Himself through Jesus Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation, that is, that God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself, not imputing their trespasses to them, and has committed to us the word of reconciliation. Now then, we are ambassadors for Christ, as though God were pleading through us: we implore you on Christ’s behalf, be reconciled to God. (II Corinthians 5:18-20)

³⁸¹ Strachan; 24.

³⁸² *Ibid.*; 163.

This is Temple-building, not Tower-building. It is the prophetic voice of the prophetic Church, crying in the wilderness of godless ideology. But in order to persevere in this ministry of reconciliation, the Church must at all times recognize its unique position in the Time Between, as full of the Spirit of the age to come while dwelling in the midst of the present age. As with individual sanctification, so also with social impact: we will not attain perfection in this age. "It is essential that the church grasp the implications of the fact that it lives in an interim time, between the first and second comings of Christ, in the murky twilight between the inauguration and the consummation of the kingdom, between the moment when the world heard unmistakable rumblings of God's justice at the cross and the moment when the storm of his judgment will arrive."³⁸³ Justice and equity will characterize the New Earth (*cp.* II Peter 3:13), but that does not mean the Church may accept passively injustice and inequity in the current age. For *"He has shown you, O Man, what is good and what the LORD requires of you: to do justly, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with your God."*

³⁸³ Wells, *God in the Wasteland*; 173.

Lesson 15 – Faith, Hope, and Love

Text: Romans 5:1-5, 8:23-25; I Corinthians 13:13; Galatians 5:5-6

*“Hope is given with the gift of a promise
or with the gift of a future.”
(H. Richard Niebuhr)*

Paul’s diagnosis of humanity apart from Christ should be the fundamental perspective of both believers and the Church in each and every age: *having no hope and without God in the world*. All too often, it seems, it is the Church that ‘has no hope,’ as she desperately pleads for recognition in the public forum or vigorously defends against the latest godless ideology. Hopelessness is, unfortunately, a common emotional state in this world, and even believers can fall into it unawares. The church in Thessalonica was struggling because of a false teaching that indicated that the Lord had returned and that believing loved ones who had already died were beyond hope. Paul assures them that hopelessness is not a true condition of any believer, alive or dead, *But I do not want you to be ignorant, brethren, concerning those who have fallen asleep, lest you sorrow as others who have no hope.*³⁸⁴ The apostle speaks often of the believer’s hope, the hope of the Church, as both the evidence and the sustenance of faith in this Time Between. Surely it is of all attitudes the unique possession of those who have been regenerated by the blood of Jesus Christ, indwelt by the Holy Spirit, and made heirs of the promises by God the Father. Christian hope is, as it were, the circulatory system of the Body of Christ, the flowing blood of assurance that reaches every part of the Body with sustaining nourishment in renewed faith. Speaking in the same context and terms that we saw in the last lesson with regard to the ‘ministry of reconciliation,’ Paul writes to the Colossian Church,

And you, who once were alienated and enemies in your mind by wicked works, yet now He has reconciled in the body of His flesh through death, to present you holy, and blameless, and above reproach in His sight – if indeed you continue in the faith, grounded and steadfast, and are not moved away from the hope of the gospel which you heard, which was preached to every creature under heaven, of which I, Paul, became a minister. (Colossians 1:21-23)

³⁸⁴ I Thessalonians 4:13

In this same passage, and thus in the same context, the apostle gives one of his characteristic ‘definitions’ of the gospel: “*Christ in you, the hope of glory.*”³⁸⁵ Most famously, though, hope appears as one of the ‘theological virtues’ – *faith, hope, and love*. Key among passages in which these three ‘virtues’ are mentioned together is, of course, I Corinthians 13:13 (the double thirteen should eliminate all concern about that number being ‘unlucky’!). “*And now abide faith, hope, love, these three; but the greatest of these is love.*”³⁸⁶ The significance of this verse is indicated by the fact that Paul has not been speaking about faith and hope, but mainly about love, throughout the letter leading up to Chapter 13. Bringing the other two concepts into the equation seems a bit incongruous to some commentators, but it is easily understood when one considers the many other places in the Pauline corpus where the three are combined. “Together these words embrace the whole of Christian existence, as believers live out the life of the Spirit in the present age, awaiting the consummation.”³⁸⁷

As noted above, these three concepts – faith, hope, and love – have often been referred to as the ‘theological virtues.’ This is an unfortunate designation, as Richard Niebuhr points out in his article titled, “Reflections on Faith, Hope and Love,” in which he acknowledges that, along with humility, joy, peace, obedience, graciousness, and the like, these three do have the appearance of moral virtue as opposed to physical well-being or intellectual acumen. “But,” Niebuhr writes, “the conception of virtue does not fit these gifts insofar as virtue means good conduct in the power of the agent and insofar as it means habit.”³⁸⁸ Niebuhr’s point is well made; the ‘theological virtues,’ like the ‘fruit of the Spirit,’ are not developed from within and are certainly not character traits of fallen human personality. Indeed, they *are* such with the strictly circumscribed realm of inter-human relationships: one can hope for a particular present at Christmas, or for a

³⁸⁵ Colossians 1:27

³⁸⁶ I Corinthians 13:13

³⁸⁷ Fee, Gordon *The First Epistle to the Corinthians* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company; 1987); 650.

³⁸⁸ Niebuhr, H. Richard “Reflections on Faith, Hope and Love” *The Journal of Religious Ethics*; Spring 1974, Vol. 2, No. 1; 152.

promotion and raise at work. But it should be evident that the Pauline meaning of the terms goes far beyond the mundane fulfillment of them. Niebuhr admits that the term 'virtue' is probably the best we can do, but continues his caveat, "That is to say, the idea of virtue itself has no real place in Christian ethics. If we continue to use it, as it seems necessary to do, since we have no other word for the gifts which have personal conduct as their matter, we must always do it with the qualification that we mean by it neither achievement nor habit, but gift and response."³⁸⁹

Paul states that love is the greatest of the three, though it should be clear that this assessment does not diminish the importance or value of the other two. Love is greatest simply because it alone is eternal. Faith, as "*the substance of things hoped for and the evidence of things not seen*,"³⁹⁰ has, as it were, an expiration date: when all things become seen at the consummation of the ages. Hope, too, has an end date, as Paul makes clear in Romans 8, "*For we were saved in this hope, but hope that is seen is not hope; for why does one still hope for what he sees?*"³⁹¹ Of course, both faith and hope have the same future goal and fruition, the *Parousia* of Jesus Christ. But love will not terminate at that event. "Love is the greatest of these three because it 'continues' on into the final glory, which the other two by their very nature do not."³⁹² What is significant in this analysis is the fact that all three are future oriented, characterizing a people who, on the basis of what has been done in the past, endure in steadfast hope in the present, looking at all times to the future consummation of the divine promises. "Through his resurrection and the gift of the Spirit, they have become a thoroughly future-oriented people; the present age is on its way out, therefore they live in the present 'as if not' (*cp.* I Cor. 7:29-31), not conditioned by the present with its hardships or suffering."³⁹³

This is a crucial component of any analysis of the Church in the World. Too often churches, denominations, and believers have been satisfied so long as the 'faith' is maintained, often meaning strict adherence to confessional standards or rigid observa-

³⁸⁹ *Idem.*

³⁹⁰ Hebrews 11:1

³⁹¹ Romans 8:24

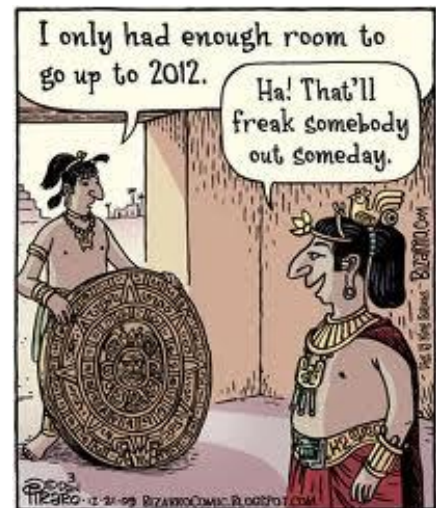
³⁹² Fee; 651.

³⁹³ *Ibid.*; 650.

tions of prescribed rituals. True faith is indeed the foundation of the true Church, and hope founded on lies is nothing more than wishful thinking or dreaming. Yet the two ‘this-age’ virtues – faith and hope – cannot be separated; there can never be a hopeless faith, any more than there can be a faithless hope. Jürgen Moltmann writes, “Thus in the Christian life faith has the priority but hope has the primacy. Without faith’s knowledge of Christ, hope becomes a utopia and remains hanging in the air. But without hope, faith falls to pieces, becomes fainthearted and ultimately a dead faith.”³⁹⁴ This truth is essential to the Church’s existence and purpose in the world in the Time Between.

The World Will End Tomorrow!

According to the ancient Mayan calendar, the world was supposed to end at the close of 2012. It did not end, of course, but it was somewhat remarkable that we made it even that far, for Y2K spelled the collapse of the world economic system and a return to the dark ages. Yet even reaching the end of the century (which was not, by the way, attained on December 31, 1999 but a year later, on December 31, 2000), was a momentous achievement considering the apocalyptic prognostications of the Cold War era from the early 1950s to the fall of the Soviet Union in the early 1990s. We have already witnessed the apocalyptic language that J. Edgar Hoover used in his op-ed piece in *Christianity Today*. Bad news sells, and nothing sells better than doomsday predictions.



Since the Industrial Revolution, hardly a generation has gone by free of some prediction of the utter destruction of human life, or the complete collapse of the current social, political, or economic system of the nation or the world. Technological advancement has been so rapid, seen from an overarching perspective of human history on this planet, that it is, frankly, quite terrifying at times. The internal combustion engine was

³⁹⁴ Moltmann, *Theology of Hope*; 20.

itself called an ‘infernal’ device, a machine from the pit of hell. In each generation the aging lament the rapid disappearance of an older, quieter, and simpler way of life – never mind the fact that this ‘older’ way of life was never quieter or simpler. Change is frightening, and rapid advances in technology, be it automobiles or GPS, give rise to the common fear that it is all going to end soon, and it will be our fault when it does. Equally frightening to many are the events that prove that even technology will not save us, as with the COVI-19 pandemic of just a few years ago.

Of course, the *crisis du jour* is ‘Climate Change.’ The language is, if anything, more apocalyptic than anything out of the Cold War, when ‘nuclear winter’ seemed never more than a moment away. Indeed, according to ‘climate science,’ we are essentially out of time on this planet and, again, it is our fault. “Why is this time urgent? It is because the vast majority of climate scientists agree that we have a maximum of ten years to avoid catastrophic changes in our planetary life support systems.”³⁹⁵ The prognosis for the planet is dire indeed, and only the most massive, worldwide governmental action, coupled with excruciating self-sacrifice on the part of wealthy, Western societies, holds out any hope of arresting the disintegration of life on Earth. One author laments,

Climate change is going to bring added stress to our social, economic, and political systems even as those systems are already facing the current round of stresses in liberal democracies, with swings to authoritarian and totalitarian rulers around the world...The scenarios above focus on the immediate human impact of climate change. Yet there are incalculable impacts in terms of habitat loss, species extinction and loss of biodiversity, leaving our world amore impoverished planet. Given the complex interconnections between the various global components of the biosphere, the impact of these changes is basically unpredictable and nonlinear. The schemes of recurrence that constitute our planet as life-friendly can break down in multiple and cumulative ways, and all on a timescale that is much shorter than the usual evolutionary processes can adjust to...For many people, the impact of climate change is hardly visible, and the timeframes too dis-

³⁹⁵ Mix, John “Science, Cosmology, and Faith: The Challenge of Climate Change to Christianity” *Currents in Theology and Mission*, 47:3 (July 2020); 56. All article references in this section will be from authors purporting to represent a Christian perspective.

tant for them to worry about. By the time they are clamoring for our political systems to find a solution, it will be too late.³⁹⁶

‘Climate Change’ started out as ‘Global Warming,’ but was changed when it became apparent that the globe is not uniformly warming. Still, one does not have to dig deep into the ‘climate science’ to realize that *warming* is the problem, with the average global temperature predicted to rise between 1.5°C and 2.0°C in just a few years, and perhaps much higher. “Warming beyond 2 degrees Celsius will trigger feedback loops of ecological decline that are irreversible.”³⁹⁷ A study on the purpose of the Church in the World is, unfortunately, not the forum for an in-depth analysis of the ‘science’ involved in ‘Climate Change.’ However, it is in keeping with the general theme of recognizing trends and the *zeitgeist* in any given generation, to point out that as recently as the early 1970s saw the scientific community sounding the tocsin against the imminence of a new Ice Age. Scores of articles were published in the late 60s and through the mid-70s warning that global pollution was reducing the amount of sunlight reaching the ground, ultimately lowering temperatures worldwide and threatening an Ice Age. One of the most read of these reports was ‘The Cooling World,’ published in the April 28, 1975 edition of the magazine *Newsweek*. The language used fifty years ago is of the same, apocalyptic nature as that used today, though in regard to a completely different ‘science.’ Perhaps the only difference is the assurance of modern ‘climate scientists’ compared to their immediate forebears.

There are ominous signs that the earth’s weather patterns have begun to change dramatically and that these changes may portend a drastic decline in food production – with serious political implications for just about every nation on earth...The evidence in support of these predictions has now begun to accumulate so massively that meteorologists are hard-pressed to keep up with it...A survey completed last year by Dr. Murray Mitchell of the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration reveals a drop of half a degree in average ground temperatures in the Northern Hemisphere between 1945 and 1968. According to George Kukla of Columbia University, satellite photos indicated a sudden, large increase in Northern Hemisphere snow cover in the winter of 1971-72.

³⁹⁶ Ormerod, Neil “The Law of the Cross and Climate Change” *Theological Studies*, 2021, Vol. 82 (2); 244-45.

³⁹⁷ Mix; 57.

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And a study released last month by two NOAA scientists notes that the amount of sunshine reaching the ground in the continental U. S. diminished by 1.3 percent between 1964 and 1972.³⁹⁸

While admitting that their knowledge of the mechanisms of global climate were rudimentary and inexact, the scientists quoted in the article nonetheless believed that world governments should sit up and take notice, and begin stockpiling food against the coming mini-Ice Age. “Climatologists are pessimistic that political leaders will take any positive action to compensate for the climatic change, or even to allay its effects. They concede that some of the more speculative solutions proposed, such as melting the arctic ice cap by covering it with black soot or diverting arctic rivers, might create problems far greater than those they solve. But the scientists see few signs that government leaders anywhere are even prepared to take the simple measure of stockpiling food or of introducing variables of climatic uncertainty into economic projections of future food supplies.”³⁹⁹ And, as today, the clock was ticking and time was running out. “The longer the planners delay, the more difficult will they find it to cope with climatic change once the results become grim reality.”⁴⁰⁰ One wonders if the mini-Ice Age of the 1970s will show up in future science textbooks as the shortest Ice Age on record.

But the fact that the globe is now warming, barely a generation after it was cooling, is established as firm science, not to be denied or ignored. Many in professing Christendom, both Protestant and Catholic, fully accept the ‘science’ and urge the Church to respond in a myriad of ways, before ‘it is too late.’ John Mix, a retired Lutheran (ELCA) pastor, is quite explicit in terms of the assimilation of modern science with Christian doctrine. Pondering the question as to whether the Church can have any impact in light of the imminent doom facing the planet, he writes, “I believe we can but only if the reality of our faith corresponds with the reality of science, a science-informed faith if you will.”⁴⁰¹ Evangelicals should unite in response: ‘We won’t.’

³⁹⁸ Gwynne, Peter “The Cooling World” *Newsweek*, April 28, 1975.

³⁹⁹ *Idem.*

⁴⁰⁰ *Idem.*

⁴⁰¹ Mix; 55.

Reading further into modern, professing Christian responses to the ‘Climate Crisis’ quickly reveals that these authors have already united their faith, such as it is, with the ‘proven’ scientific evidence of evolution and of a very, very old earth. Mix even coins a geologic-sounding name (perhaps it is not original to him) for the current age: Anthropocene Age. He quotes climate science as recording the highest atmospheric CO₂ level in the past 800,000 years with reference to the current 407 ppm.⁴⁰² Never mind the statistical accuracy of measurements purporting to be 800,000 years old, the issue here is the assumption of the Old Earth, itself an essential tenet of Evolutionary Theory. This is the common platform for professing Christians advocating ‘Climate Science’ and theorizing what the world, and the Church in the world, must do to at least alleviate the coming catastrophe. Denial of the ‘science’ behind ‘Climate Change,’ which is usually hand-in-hand with denial of Evolution, is tantamount to ‘believing the lie,’ the lie of ‘Climate Deniers’ who do not have the good sense to accept the infallible results of science. Catholic theologian Neil Ormerod writes, “We are caught up in the general bias of common sense which is unwilling to grasp the significance of theoretical scientific arguments; the group bias of corporations that are willing to continue their destructive practices so long as they remain profitable; and the individual bias of the vast majority of those in wealthy nations who prefer to enjoy the comforts provided by western lifestyles to the privations required to significantly reduce personal carbon footprints.”⁴⁰³

Questions of science, of global warming (or cooling), aside, the other essential feature of modern ‘Climate Science’ and the catastrophic ‘Climate Crisis,’ is that it is all man’s fault. Ormerod writes, “We are in the grip of a major cycle of ecological decline, brought about by human sins of commission and omission, that cries out for a path of redemptive action.”⁴⁰⁴ Indeed, human responsibility for ‘Climate Change’ is more accurately the fault of Western, technologically-advanced and wealthy society, not just mankind in general. Mix considers at least one root cause of ‘Climate Change’ the

⁴⁰² ‘ppm’ is ‘parts per million. 407 ppm is equivalent to 0.0407% of all atmospheric gases, the vast majority of which are nitrogen and oxygen. CO₂ arrives in distant fourth, behind Argon.

⁴⁰³ Ormerod; 245-46.

⁴⁰⁴ *Ibid.*; 246.

treatment of the native American Indians by the white settlers. “Mourn and grieve our destruction of the First Nation people whose spirituality truly meant living in harmony with the plant and animal species, the land and water.”⁴⁰⁵ Kevin O’Brien, a very white Professor of Religion at Pacific Lutheran University, broadens the range of white culpability, arguing in his article “Climate Change and Intersectionality: Christian Ethics, White Supremacy, and Atmospheric Defilement” that the entire ‘Climate Crisis’ can be ultimately attributed to white supremacy and cannot be dealt with apart from white repentance and reparations for other contemporary hot-button issues as colonialism and slavery, as well as the oppression of LGBTQ+ lifestyles and gender fluidity. The widening of the scope of victimization is called ‘Intersectionality’ and is a fundamental component unifying the various and disparate society-destroying ideologies of the current age. Thus O’Brien can boldly state, and state as a professing Christian, “Only by standing against the defilement of women and people of color can we effectively resist the defilement of the atmosphere.”⁴⁰⁶

The mainstream Christian response to ‘Climate Science’ and the ‘Climate Crisis,’ meaning the wholesale acceptance of both the ‘science’ and the ‘crisis,’ is epitomized in the 2015 encyclical by Pope Francis, titled *Laudato Si’*, which means, “Praise Be to You, My Lord.” In this widely-read document – both within and outside of the Catholic communion – Francis adds his voice to



Pope Francis (b. 1936)

the chorus of contemporary Christians who place the blame for global warming squarely on the wealthy, Capitalistic West, and calls for dramatic changes in policy as well as for international enforcement of climate ‘goals.’ What is significant to our study in what the Pope has written, and so many in both Catholicism and Protestantism have echoed, is the manner in which the Church is supposed to view ‘Climate Change’ as di-

⁴⁰⁵ Mix; 57.

⁴⁰⁶ O’Brien, Kevin J. “Climate Change and Intersectionality: Christian Ethics, White Supremacy, and Atmospheric Defilement” *Journal of the Society of Christian Ethics*, Vol. 40, No. 2 (2020); 318.

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vine judgment, producing repentance (and, usually, reparations) on the part of the wicked West. As with so many other ideologies both now and over the past several centuries, the ultimate result of the proposed international action would be the complete dismantling and destruction of modern, Western civilization. But evangelicals must take note of where these professing brethren are coming from, for it is quickly evident that their arguments and solutions are by no means biblical.

Francis, for instance, begins his encyclical by referencing his namesake, Francis of Assisi, with regard to ‘our Sister, Mother Earth.’ The Pope writes in the opening paragraph of his treatise, “‘Praise be to you, my Lord’. In the words of this beautiful canticle, Saint Francis of Assisi reminds us that our common home is like a sister with whom we share our life and a beautiful mother who opens her arms to embrace us. ‘Praise be to you, my Lord, through our Sister, Mother Earth, who sustains and governs us, and who produces various fruit with coloured flowers and herbs’”⁴⁰⁷ Mix is even bolder in his abandonment of any measure of Lutheran orthodoxy as he plots the path forward for the Church in the face of the impending climate catastrophe, “Integrate the story of the universe in our worship gatherings and daily meditations. We are stardust including particles that were formed in the early emergence of the cosmos. Every molecule of us is earth (Gen. 2:7) and our closest star is the only one we know of that produces vegetables in the universe. Until we see and trust our earthiness, we will not see the land and water as the source from which our Creator chose to make us. It’s time to write new creeds that reflect our 14 billion year cosmic and earth story.”⁴⁰⁸

There is very little biblical exegesis in *Laudato Si*,’ but that is sadly not surprising in a moder Roman Catholic encyclical. More remarkable is the statement from Mix, himself a retired minister in the Evangelical Lutheran Synod (ELCA), that we should “Make the exegesis of our ecology more important than Bible study. The primary reve-

⁴⁰⁷ ENCYCLICAL LETTER *LAUDATO SI*’ OF THE HOLY FATHER FRANCIS ON CARE FOR OUR COMMON HOME; [Laudato si’ \(24 May 2015\) | Francis \(vatican.va\)](#). Accessed 06November2023.

⁴⁰⁸ Mix; 57.

lation of the cosmos must take precedence over the written revelation for the time being.”⁴⁰⁹ Mix beatifies Greta Thunberg as the modern prophetess of Joel 2,

Today Greta Thunberg embodies the prophet Joel’s vision of ‘your daughters shall prophecy’ by calling for countries to step up to their maturity and sanity by enacting policies that are sustainable. God has no hands but ours to support justice (balance, right relationships) among all the species of the earth.⁴¹⁰

Such statements, and there are many, many more, are truly breathtaking. The crisis caused by human (read ‘Western, Capitalist’) sin is so great, so apocalyptic, that the Church must abandon both biblical exegesis and doctrinal conviction. “Embrace the wisdom that is in every spiritual tradition. We don’t have time for doctrinal debates. All parochialism and human-centered hubris have impoverished not only our understanding of who and where we are on our evolutionary journey, but our ability to call forth the best that is in our wisdom traditions on behalf of eco-justice.”⁴¹¹ Believers who throw in their lot with the ‘Climate Crisis’ ideology should be aware of the group they are joining. The panic is nothing less than the same apocalyptic mantra intended to drive men to fear and to societal deconstruction and eventual destruction. Thus it is satanic. It is tower-building, through and through, as evidenced by the consistent theme that only a worldwide, international, and enforceable action plan will be sufficient to address the crisis. Pope Francis is in line with the general attitude regarding the ‘solution’ to the ‘Climate Crisis,’ “Given this situation, it is essential to devise stronger and more efficiently organized international institutions, with functionaries who are appointed fairly by agreement among national governments, and empowered to impose sanctions.”⁴¹²

But does this mean the planet is not warming up? Or cooling down, depending on one’s decade? Is there no validity to ‘climate science’ at all? More importantly, does the Church have a voice in the matter and, if so, what should she be saying? Again, the

⁴⁰⁹ *Idem.*

⁴¹⁰ *Idem.*

⁴¹¹ *Idem.*

⁴¹² *Laudato Si’*; 175.

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Bible, and especially Paul, does not leave us speechless. The apostle provides us with the most thorough description of the status of the natural world, both in terms of its current condition and its future hope.

For the earnest expectation of the creation eagerly waits for the revealing of the sons of God. For the creation was subjected to futility, not willingly, but because of Him who subjected it in hope; because the creation itself also will be delivered from the bondage of corruption into the glorious liberty of the children of God. For we know that the whole creation groans and labors with birth pangs together until now. (Romans 8:19-22)

The believer thus understands that the fall of Man impacted the whole of Creation, and that the redemption of a people for God's Name includes the redemption of Creation. In the meantime, *the whole creation groans and labors with birth pangs*. What does this look like? Well, perhaps cyclical variations in global temperature, for one thing. Earthquakes, volcanoes, hurricanes have all been seen as natural forces endemic to the global turmoil in both atmosphere and crust. But how often do we hear the Church proclaiming, with Paul, that plate tectonics is itself part of the corruption and futility to which the earth has been subject on account of human sin? 'Climate Change' as a phrase and as a scientific, geological phenomenon should not frighten believers, so long as the 'science' indeed qualifies for that description. In other words, as it is evident from written history that large segments of the globe experienced sudden and drastic temperature swings in the past, there is no *a priori* evidence that such a transition is not happening now. The planet is indeed life-supporting, but it is not a stable and calm place to live!

Natural phenomenon can be scientifically explained through the forces of plate tectonics or atmospheric patterns. Historical 'Ice Ages,' such as in the 14th Century, might have been caused by the eruption of massive volcanoes, which spread ash throughout the atmosphere and effectively blocked both the light and the heat of the sun from reaching large swathes of the earth. But are there other possible causes of physical phenomenon? Certainly we learn from the Old Testament that a lack of obedience on the part of Israel would have a definite and profound impact on the weather,

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particularly the necessary former and latter rains. Observance of the weekly Sabbaths and the sabbatical year, when the land was to lie fallow and ‘rest,’ is tied directly to the fruitfulness of the land in the other years.

And after all this, if you do not obey Me, then I will punish you seven times more for your sins. I will break the pride of your power; I will make your heavens like iron and your earth like bronze. And your strength shall be spent in vain; for your land shall not yield its produce, nor shall the trees of the land yield their fruit. (Leviticus 26:18-20)

Unfortunately, many contemporary evangelicals continue not only to connect natural disasters with human sin, but to claim to understand God’s will and purpose in this or that earthquake or hurricane. John Hagee infamously declared that the devastating 2005 Hurricane Katrina was the judgment of God against the sin of New Orleans, and Jerry Falwell claimed that the 9/11 attacks were the result of such evil influences in America as gays and lesbians, pagans, abortionists, feminists, and the ACLU.⁴¹³ The biblical connection between the nation’s obedience and atmospheric events may indeed prove such a link between catastrophes and divine judgment, but apart from the explicit witness of Scripture, it is a very dangerous thing for the Church to attempt to discern the Lord’s providence in the vagaries of nature. Still, among ‘evangelical ecologists,’ the idea of the ‘Climate Crisis’ being a call to corporate repentance is strong and appealing, as prevalent among liberal Christian articles as the similar statements are among the conservatives seeking to give God’s purpose to this or that hurricane or earthquake. As atmospheric and climatic judgment upon Israel was a call for the nation to repent and return to God, a sizeable segment of modern Christianity is calling for the same from the Church – repentance of Capitalism, of consumerism, and of an oversized ‘carbon footprint.’

Michael Lefebvre, a Presbyterian minister and theologian, writes in an article published in *Christianity Today* – illustrating for one thing just how far the magazine has come since publishing the op-ed by J. Edgar Hoover over half a century earlier – that the pattern of disobedience and atmospheric disaster in the Old Testament stands as an abid-

⁴¹³ [Pat Robertson Blames Natural Disaster Victims - The Atlantic](#). Accessed 07November2023.

ing lesson to the Church in the current ‘crisis.’ “The Bible does not tell us specifically about today’s climate change or what is causing it. But we do not need that kind of precision from the Bible. Scripture is sufficient in its reports about God’s works with his people of old, preserving those lessons to inform our response to comparable situations today.”⁴¹⁴ This seems innocuous, little different than colonial preachers calling on their communities to repent in the face of the impending civil conflict with the mother country, Britain. But Lefebvre’s approach is really no less dangerous for being less subtle than John Hagee, Pat Robertson, or Jerry Falwell. He, too, has imbibed the gospel of modern science, “Science, in cooperation with the convicting power of the Holy Spirit, can help us recognize parts of our lives in need of spiritual renewal.”⁴¹⁵

The bottom line of Lefebvre’s approach is the same as the more liberal and radical voices already quoted above, that ‘Climate Change’ is a proven science, that it is caused by human activity (activity that constitutes *sin*), and that massive corporate repentance and active reformation is required by God in light of the ‘crisis.’ He writes,

One way or another, the changing climate today will bring changes to human societies. Whether or not God is reproofing specific sins, the increasing storms, droughts, and other consequences will afflict vast segments of humanity. And, as is often the case, the vulnerable will suffer most for the failures of the powerful. The church is here to promote the work of redemption in such times. Christians risk squandering this opportunity for witness by denying or downplaying climate change...Science can highlight the mechanics of climate change, and politicians can regulate behavior. It is up to the church to touch the conscience and bring a redemptive call to the culture.⁴¹⁶

Thus the purpose of the Church in the World is to embrace the ‘Climate Crisis’ and to seek, through repentance and bold ecological initiatives, the reclamation of society from its wanton consumerism and wastefulness. In order for the Church not to squander this opportunity, she must adopt the ‘Climate Crisis’ agenda and align herself with its ‘science.’ The tenor of all these articles and statements by ostensibly believing authors, is that the hope of the planet rests on mankind somehow pulling back from the

⁴¹⁴ Lefebvre, Michael “Global Warming and Reformation” *Christianity Today*, September 2021; 49.

⁴¹⁵ *Idem*.

⁴¹⁶ *Ibid.*; 50.

brink of climate disaster, and that the Church must throw her weight into the struggle before it is too late. It is the same apocalyptic voice with which J. Edgar Hoover warned that Christians of the 1950s could not let up on their advocacy for ‘containment’ of Communism, and their support of all government policies to that end, or life as we know it (or knew it) would end.

On the one hand, the believer knows that nature will continue on a tumultuous course, cycling hot and cold, and often disastrously so for large segments of both the human population and the animal kingdom. Paul informs us in Romans 8 that these cycles and events fall under the rubric of the sin of Man, and particularly Adam’s Fall, so it is unnecessary and dangerous to attempt to find specific divine causes or judgments to ‘fit’ individual events or catastrophes. The corruption that human sin has wrought upon God’s good Creation is sufficient as a basal explanation of the whole groaning natural world. However, on the other hand, Scripture so ties human behavior and natural phenomenon – both in general via the corruption to which Creation has been subjected, and specifically in terms of Israel’s disobedience and its consequences – that the believer also cannot deny that human activity in its current and future form may, and probably will, have negative impact on the natural world. In other words, believers need no adopt the ‘Climate Crisis’ mantra to oppose pollution, exploitation of natural resources, or wasteful consumerism. It is not blasphemous for a believer to recycle plastics.

Yet there is a fine line between wise and sensitive stewardship, which is itself merely an extension of the Creation Mandate, and the adoption of a pagan, nature-centered, and tower-building ideology. Those who do the latter, and especially in the name of Christ and of the Church, are becoming unequally yoked with those who ‘have no hope.’ Believers cannot guarantee that the current environmental *status quo* will continue, that it will get worse or better. Believers cannot resist reasonable efforts toward conservationism and clean air and water – things that benefit all mankind and constitute a form of equity and justice. But believer cannot accept the notion that the world will come to an end due to human activity – nuclear proliferation or ‘climate

change.’ The world will not end until the *Parousia* and the advent of the New Heavens and the New Earth. The abiding and powerful attitude of the Church in the face of any and all ‘crises’ is *hope*, a hope that is founded on divine promise and ratified by the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead. Those who wish to place so much responsibility on mankind both for the destruction and for the redemption of the world, ought to consider Paul’s words in I Corinthians 15, “*If in this life only we have hope in Christ, we are of all men the most pitiable.*”⁴¹⁷ In the same context, the apostles tells us in general outline the progress of this world in the Time Between.

But now Christ is risen from the dead, and has become the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep. For since by man came death, by Man also came the resurrection of the dead. For as in Adam all die, even so in Christ all shall be made alive. But each one in his own order: Christ the firstfruits, afterward those who are Christ’s at His coming. Then comes the end, when He delivers the kingdom to God the Father, when He puts an end to all rule and all authority and power. For He must reign till He has put all enemies under His feet. The last enemy that will be destroyed is death. For “He has put all things under His feet.” But when He says “all things are put under Him,” it is evident that He who put all things under Him is excepted. Now when all things are made subject to Him, then the Son Himself will also be subject to Him who put all things under Him, that God may be all in all. (I Corinthians 15:20-28)

Hope is the sure ground of faith: faith informs hope and hope in return strengthens faith. Both, however, are grounded in the love of God who promised redemption and blessing to all who are in Christ. “The more trusting the hope or the more hopeful the trust, the more it is possible now to respond to God and companions with anticipations of the love and faith that shall be. Hope makes for anticipated attainment of faith and love, as when the hopeful heir of immeasurable wealth is lavishly generous on a meager allowance.”⁴¹⁸ In this world and life we are promised nothing more than persecution and tribulation, but believers are inwardly endowed with a hope that sees through the crises of the Time Between, a hope that presses on steadfastly toward the *hope of glory*, regardless of political, social, or natural upheaval. This encouraging char-

⁴¹⁷ I Corinthians 15:19

⁴¹⁸ Niebuhr, *Reflections*; 156.

acteristic of life in Christ is the frequent refrain of Paul in his letters, not least in Romans 5 where he once again combines the three ‘theological virtues,’

Therefore, having been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom also we have access by faith into this grace in which we stand, and rejoice in hope of the glory of God. And not only that, but we also glory in tribulations, knowing that tribulation produces perseverance; and perseverance, character; and character, hope. Now hope does not disappoint, because the love of God has been poured out in our hearts by the Holy Spirit who was given to us. (Romans 5:1-5)

Hope is the key characteristic of the Church when she is true to her nature and calling in the world. This is not optimism; there has often been very little to be optimistic about through the course of history. It is, rather, a fixation on promise, the promise that “He who began a good work in you will perfect it unto the day of Jesus Christ.”⁴¹⁹ It is the



Mark Seifrid (b. 1953)

– yet we must still obtain it.”⁴²⁰

living assurance that God is faithful and will accomplish all of His purposes, fulfilling all of His promises, as He has already done in the resurrection of Jesus. Thus hope is not entirely based on what is to come; it is equally founded on what has already been. Mark Seifrid writes, “We misrepresent Paul’s thought if we suppose that he regards salvation as partly ours now, and partly still to come. Instead he juxtaposes absolutes. The whole of salvation is our already in Christ – God has claimed us as the ‘first fruits’ of salvation

The Church stands in every generation as the crux between the world that is and the world that is coming, participating in both through her physical presence in this world, and the indwelling of the Holy Spirit, the downpayment of the world to come. Because of this dual citizenship, and because of the priority of her heavenly citizenship, the Church is uniquely poised to witness a living hope among those who have no hope

⁴¹⁹ Philippians 1:6

⁴²⁰ Seifrid, Mark A. “Faith, Hope, and Love: Paul’s Message to the Church at Thessalonica” *The Southern Baptist Journal of Theology* · SBJT 3/3 (Fall 1999); 61.

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and are without God in the world (*cp.* Eph. 2:12). From the unassailable position of solid hope, resting firmly and steadfastly on the promises of God which are all “*Yes, and Amen, in Christ,*” the Church bears witness to both the true nature of sin’s corruption in the world and the only true hope for peace and stability in the New Earth, secured by the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Believers thus neither become ‘eco-Christians’ or ‘deniers.’ They are, rather, the new humanity founded in Truth, and as such they can expect to be persecuted for holding a hope different than the hopeless ‘hope’ of the apocalyptic world. But Paul warned us this, too.

Now thanks be to God who always leads us in triumph in Christ, and through us diffuses the fragrance of His knowledge in every place. For we are to God the fragrance of Christ among those who are being saved and among those who are perishing. To the one we are the aroma of death leading to death, and to the other the aroma of life leading to life. And who is sufficient for these things? For we are not, as so many, peddling the word of God; but as of sincerity, but as from God, we speak in the sight of God in Christ. (II Corinthians 2:14-17)

Only from this position of hope can the Church find her prophetic voice in the world. Seifrid aptly summarizes the Church’s true position: “It is rather the commitment of Christian hope, which takes present responsibility seriously even as it waits for the transformation of the present order. The world and its concerns necessarily assume a secondary significance, even without losing their importance.”⁴²¹ Moltmann adds, “Hope makes the Church the source of new impulses toward the realization of righteousness, freedom and humanity here in the light of the promised future that is to come.”⁴²² And finally, in light of the corruption and groanings to which man’s sin has subjected and continues to subject the natural order, Paul grounds the Church in hope,

Not only that, but we also who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, even we ourselves groan within ourselves, eagerly waiting for the adoption, the redemption of our body. For we were saved in this hope, but hope that is seen is not hope; for why does one still hope for what he sees? But if we hope for what we do not see, we eagerly wait for it with perseverance. (Romans 8:23-25)

⁴²¹ *Ibid*; 63.

⁴²² Moltmann; 22.

Lesson 16 – Faithful Presence

Text: Ephesians 5:1-16, 6:10-19; Romans 8:31-39,13:7-14; Colossians 4:5-6

*“The project of bringing heaven down to earth
always results in bringing hell up from below.”*
(Lesslie Newbigin)

So what now of the ‘city set upon a hill’ hopefully proclaimed by John Winthrop? Christianity in the United States has seen remarkable ups and downs since the days of Plymouth Plantation, times of powerful political influence and times of essential irrelevance, times of spiritual revival and times of rampant apostasy. Over the course of three centuries, professing Christendom in America has helped foment a rebellion, abolish slavery, ban the production and use of alcoholic beverages, and combat world Communism. In the meantime, denominations multiplied like rabbits while doctrine became less and less important to both individual believers and their church assemblies. Immigration – the steady influx of the *tired, poor, huddled masses yearning to breathe free* welcomed to Ellis Island by the Statue of Liberty – brought great diversity to the country, resulting in the modern pluralistic society in which multiple truth claims, as well as the claim that there is no truth, vie for the public conscience and private adherence. Women have gone from subservient beings to possessing the vote to ‘ownership of their own bodies’ to gender fluidity, while blacks have progressed from slavery yet still find the need to protest that their lives matter. Did John Winthrop’s dream fail? Or was it an illegitimate hope in the first place? Certainly, one cannot imagine that the Puritan would be at all pleased if he were to return to the Massachusetts of the present day.

Evangelical Christianity in America generally recognizes that things are not as they were intended to be by those who braved the Atlantic to plant a ‘City Upon a Hill’ in the New World. Failure, if we may judge it to be that, was not for lack of effort. Alexis de Tocqueville noted frequently in his *Democracy in America* just how central a role religion played in American society, and how influential Christianity was in the public forum of the early 19th Century. From the patriotic pulpits prior to the American Revolution, to the Moral Majority of the 1980s, evangelicals have attempted to insert the reli-

gious voice into the political debates that have always raged in this country, with varying degrees of success – though the measure of meaning of that word is as subjective as that of ‘failure.’ Newbigin’s pithy comment is true to history: “The project of bringing heaven down to earth always results in bringing hell up from below.”⁴²³

We have seen in this study how the American Experiment in self-government, a venture infused with the ideals of ‘religious tolerance’ and ‘liberty of conscience,’ coincided with and greatly imbibed the philosophical era known now as the Enlightenment. An era of Rationalism stimulated by an epistemology that combined both Renaissance and Reformation, served to privatize religion and progressively isolate the Church’s voice from the public square. In the meantime, the contemporaneous Industrial Revolution created vast new opportunities for employment, driving a human migration and mobility unseen in human history except in times of war and famine. *Manifest Destiny* would energize the conquest and populating of the vast American continent, while atomizing the insular family and village society that was the norm for multiple generations. Enlightenment Rationalism and the New Science combined to drive a wedge between ‘fact’ and ‘value,’ exalting the former as objective reality and relegating the latter as personal opinion or ‘faith.’

The combination of these forces, seemingly unrelated but historically intertwined, served to privatize religion to a degree completely unknown to the vast majority of mankind throughout history. By the end of the 20th Century, the standard wisdom of American society proclaimed that religion is a purely private matter, and while society might be happy that you have found ‘what works for you,’ it has no tolerance for your imposition of that discovery upon either their own conscience or the political discourse. “There are loud voices that insist that the church has no business meddling with matters of politics and economics; that its business is with the eternal salvation of the human soul; and that if it undertakes to give ethical advice at all, it should be confined

⁴²³ Newbigin, Lesslie *Foolishness to the Greeks* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company; 1986); 117.

to advice about personal conduct."⁴²⁴ Of course, in the several decades since Newbiggin wrote these words, American society has made it clear that it has no desire, or patience, for hearing what the church has to say about its 'personal conduct,' either.

Through it all, and somewhat behind the scenes, we have witnessed the end of the 'Constantinian Settlement,' the prevailing theo-political system of Western Europe and her colonies, in which a tacit agreement existed between the Christian Church, however represented, and the civil government. By this agreement, which did itself evolve over the generations, the State would allow the Church to function as society's conscience, while the Church would support the authoritative structure of the State in the lives of her parishioners. This system began to break down in the early 19th Century, though the Church failed to recognize its collapse, and in many cases still fails to realize that the system on which the Church relied has disappeared from the West entirely. Those who recognize this new social paradigm seem to be reacting in one of two ways: either to fight even harder to maintain the relationship between Church and State that prevailed for so much of the past fifteen hundred years, or to retreat into a semi-monastic idyllic 'New Testament' church that has little or no contact with the surrounding culture. Both responses to the current reality are illegitimate. "It is certain we cannot go back to the *corpus Christianum*. It is also certain – and this needs to be said sharply in view of the prevalence among Christians of a kind of anarchistic romanticism – that we cannot go back to a pre-Constantinian innocence."⁴²⁵ James Hunter, in reference to the frequent attempts among evangelicals to employ the political weapons of this age, writes, "In our day, Christians have not only embraced strategies that are incapable of bringing about the ends to which they aspire, they have also embraced strategies that are deeply problematic, shortsighted, and at times, profoundly corrupted."⁴²⁶

Western Evangelicalism must certainly rethink the role of the Church in the modern world, no less than the role of individual believers within modern, pluralistic society. The end of the Constantinian era offers a tremendous opportunity for this re-

⁴²⁴ *Ibid.*; 95.

⁴²⁵ *Ibid.*; 102.

⁴²⁶ Hunter, *To Change The World*; 193.

consideration, as it is no longer a self-evident reality that religion and politics should speak with at least a similar voice. The current situation within Western cultures is ironically mirrored by the rise of fundamentalist Islam and the increasingly violent advocacy of *sharia*, or ‘holy law.’ As the ‘Christian’ West abandons any connection between the public forum and the temple, Islam is offering a reminder of the oppression and brutality that accompanies theonomy when it succeeds. Newbigin puts the matter bluntly, “The sacralizing of politics, the total identification of a political goal with the will of God, always unleashes demonic powers.”⁴²⁷

Also significant in this summary chapter is the realization that our world in the 21st Century does not differ significantly from the world that Paul inhabited in the 1st Century. If one looks past the undeniable differential in available technology, the similarity in the socio-political environment become obvious. There was a single, dominant political power present in the Mediterranean world as there is a single, dominant political power today. The places where Paul went on his missionary journeys were diverse in ethnicity as well as religion, no less pluralistic than the ethnically-mixed, religiously diverse West today. Paul’s gospel message went forth into a hostile world, both religiously and epistemologically – no one wanted to hear about a crucified god and the apostle himself acknowledged that the message of the resurrection was ‘foolishness to the Greeks.’ Yet so long as this new religion remained a matter of private conscience and observation, and did not challenge the dominance of the Emperor in all thought and life, it would have been permitted to exist as one of the many ‘secret societies’ that were legally sanctioned within the empire. The same venue exists for today’s Church: no one wants to hear the foolishness, but private observation of one’s faith is fully tolerated, so long as it does not obtrude into the public life of society.

Of course, we know that Paul could not allow the faith to be solely a private religion (nor could Peter, or John or, ultimately, Jesus). The early Church’s proclamation of Jesus as ‘Lord and Savior’ was a direct affront to the emperor, who used the title *Kurios kai Soter* for himself alone. Most of Paul’s troubles, both with Jews and with Gentiles,

⁴²⁷Newbigin; 116.

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was his complete unwillingness to relegate faith in Jesus Christ to a purely individualistic and private matter. He was accused of speaking against Moses and the Temple in Jerusalem, and he was accused of speaking against Artemis and her temple in Ephesus. The apostles as a group were known as the men who *turned the world upside down*. Thus it may be concluded that any approach to the 'Church in the World' that avoids contact, and the inevitable conflict, is not the approach that Paul took. This, we have seen, is the direct and unavoidable implication of what Paul considered the Church to be: the New Humanity of the New Creation. Western Evangelicalism has lost much, but perhaps nothing so vitally important as the reality that Jesus Christ has inaugurated a New Creation through His death, resurrection, and ascension, and that the Church in this Time Between is the New Humanity, proclaiming the victory of Christ over sin, Satan, and death. This is no more a private faith than the earth is a private planet; man is created a social creature and cannot live in isolation. Hence, and largely through Paul's teachings, the early Church "knew itself to be the bearer of the promise of the reign of Yahweh over all nations."⁴²⁸ This is still the mandate for the Church in the world today. Perhaps it is of some comfort, given the current antipathy of the Western world toward the message of the gospel, to remember that it was no more receptive in Paul's day.

For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. For it is written:

I will destroy the wisdom of the wise,

And bring to nothing the understanding of the prudent.

Where is the wise? Where is the scribe? Where is the disputer of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of this world? For since, in the wisdom of God, the world through wisdom did not know God, it pleased God through the foolishness of the message preached to save those who believe. For Jews request a sign, and Greeks seek after wisdom; but we preach Christ crucified, to the Jews a stumbling block and to the Greeks foolishness, but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. Because the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men.

(I Corinthians 1:18-25)

⁴²⁸ *Ibid.*; 100.

The Constantinian Settlement convinced the Church (at least in the West) that the situation Paul faced no longer prevailed. This can hardly be maintained today: the gospel is foolishness to our modern, scientific world. Yet it remains the power of God to salvation (*cp.* Rom. 1:16). It may be, and many have surmised, that the attempt to unite Church and State via the Constantinian Settlement in its myriad forms, served largely to remove the offense of the gospel, to domesticate it and thereby to inoculate countless generations against its salvific effects. The contemporary Church need not worry about this problem anymore.

Indeed, one logical conclusion from this study is that what the Church of today most needs is a return to the realization of the power of the Cross and the hope of the Resurrection in the life of the Church. “In the Cross the ruler of this world is unmasked and dethroned, and this decisive event is the clue to all subsequent history.”⁴²⁹ The Church is uniquely positioned *in Christ*, to bear witness to what God has done *in Christ*, and to thereby become what Paul envisioned her to be, “*the pillar and foundation of the truth.*”⁴³⁰ This places the Church in the role of prophetic witness and critic in the midst of each and every age and culture in which she lives. “The church witnesses to that true end for which all creation and all human beings exist, the truth by which all alleged values are to be judged.”⁴³¹ But on this side of the Constantinian Settlement, we must recognize and accept the failure of all *Christ and Culture* paradigms that prevailed during that era, seeing them to be false perspectives that each its own way fails to recognize both the ‘wholly Other’ aspect of God and of His Church. In the world there is only corruption of truth and virtue, often to the extent of becoming manifest falsehood and wickedness. The truth is in Jesus Christ, who is Himself *the Way, the Truth, and the Life.*⁴³² Therefore, “Falsehood can be overcome only by the truth, and the truth has been manifested once for all in Jesus Christ. It is the business of the church to bear witness in

⁴²⁹ *Idem.*

⁴³⁰ I Timothy 3:15

⁴³¹ Newbiggin; 117.

⁴³² John 14:6

the public realm to that truth.”⁴³³ This, again, is Temple-building; all else is nothing more than Babel revived.

World history is full of the dreams of a new order that will draw all humankind together. When these dreams are ours, we call them dreams of world brotherhood; when others try to make their dreams come true, we call it imperialism. Imperialism is the name we give to other people’s proposals for human unity...There can be no center for the unity of the human race except in him who said, ‘I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all men to myself.’⁴³⁴

Transition, or perhaps translation, is the condition of the believer according to the Apostle Paul. On so many levels, the work of regeneration translates the sinner into something completely new. Sinner to saint, yes, but also dead in trespass and sin to alive in Christ, citizen of the kingdom of darkness to citizen of the kingdom of Jesus Christ. Like the metaphors that Paul uses to describe the Church, the descriptive terms of translation are crucial to the believer’s understanding of what has happened in Christ. The caveat is necessary here, that this transition from one state of being (under the wrath of God) to a new state of being (adopted into the family of God) was never envisioned by Paul as merely individualistic salvation; the Church, the Body of Christ, is always on the apostle’s radar. And one of the most significant transitions with regard to the Church’s position and purpose in the world, is from darkness to light. It is significant that Paul does not refer to unbelievers as being *in* darkness (though they are) or to believers as *in* the light (though they are); rather, he leaves off any preposition and makes an ontological statement instead, referring to one’s *essential being* as either ‘darkness’ or ‘light.’

For you were once darkness, but now you are light in the Lord. Walk as children of light (for the fruit of the Spirit is in all goodness, righteousness, and truth), finding out what is acceptable to the Lord. And have no fellowship with the unfruitful works of darkness, but rather expose them. For it is shameful even to speak of those things which are done by them in secret. But all things that are exposed are made manifest by the light, for whatever makes manifest is light. (Ephesians 5:8-13)

⁴³³ Newbiggin; 122.

⁴³⁴ *Ibid.*; 123.

‘Children of light,’ that is one of the most powerful and significant descriptions of believers assembled together in the Church. Far from putting the light under a bushel basket, the divine intention through the Church is to *expose* the darkness and its deeds. This is the prophetic voice of the Church which cannot be silenced without the Church losing her identity completely. So long as the lampstand remains, the prophetic message of the gospel and of the divine will and purpose continues to go forth from the Church. To whatever extent the Church’s message deviates from the gospel witness – the full gospel witness of the New Creation under the King of kings, Jesus Christ, who now sits at the right hand of God and to whom *all authority has been given in heaven and earth* – to that extent the flame flickers, eventually going out entirely. But as under the Old Covenant, so under the New: God is never without His witness, His remnant.

What Paul envisioned for the Church in the world was not ‘this little light of mine’ but the glory of the One “*who said, ‘Light shall shine out of darkness’*” manifested through the Church as those in whose hearts He “*has shone...to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ.*”⁴³⁵ James Dunn writes, “We have already observed that his [*i.e.*, Paul] understanding of the process of salvation is integrally corporate in character, that he reacted strongly against any thought of a maturity not dependent on and interdependent with the community of faith. The individual as individual, therefore, could hardly hope to live out Paul’s ethical principles solely on his or her own.”⁴³⁶ Perhaps the greatest hurdle facing the modern evangelical Church in the West is returning from the rampant individualism of both our society and the Church, to a more biblical, as well as more historical, understanding of the corporate nature – not to mention the corporate power – of the believing community.

Again, this is by no means to diminish the importance of individual salvation, individual repentance and faith. The Church is not a mystical institution that exists separately from the individual sinners redeemed by the grace of God, through faith in

⁴³⁵ II Corinthians 4:6

⁴³⁶ Dunn, *Theology of Paul*; 672.

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the finished work of Jesus Christ, and indwelt by the Holy Spirit. The argument here, however, is that the *Church* in the world is of far greater significance and effectiveness than is the *believer* in the world. Without detracting from the importance of individual salvation, Paul speaks most consistently of the individual believer being an integral and necessary part of a larger, corporate assembly – the *body* of which each believer is a joint or ligament, a hand, foot, ear or eye. This corporate emphasis fits hand-in-glove with the apostle’s understanding of the New Creation in Jesus Christ, and the community of faith as the New Humanity living in this Time Between by the power of the Spirit of the age to come.

The corporate emphasis is also manifest in Paul’s several teachings on the *charismata*, the ‘grace gifts’ by which the Holy Spirit enlivens and builds up the Church, as we saw in the third session of these Pauline studies. Romans 12 is one of those familiar ‘gifts’ passages, and its opening exhortation touches on both the believer’s and the Church’s position vis-à-vis the world,

I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that you present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable to God, which is your reasonable service. And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, that you may prove what is that good and acceptable and perfect will of God. (Romans 12:1-2)

The language here is reminiscent of the Levitical service in the tabernacle and Temple, and thus constitutes not so much the discipleship of individual believers as the service of all believers as living stones in the Temple which is Christ’s Body, the Church. Paul’s reference to *this world* – literally, *age* – implies what he states more explicitly elsewhere, that the Church, and believers in the Church, are not of this world but are now partakers of the age to come. Victor Furnish writes, “The appeal not to be ‘conformed to this age’ presupposes the believer’s belonging to another age in which, through faith, he already participates...The exhortations are not designed for some ‘in-

terim' before the future comes; they are rooted precisely in the future as it is already present to faith, though still hidden within this age."⁴³⁷

Here, then, are the basic principles: the Church of Jesus Christ is the New Humanity of the New Creation, born again to a living hope through the regeneration of the Holy Spirit, by faith in Jesus Christ. This New Humanity is called to live as 'children of light,' the same Light that alone initiated Creation and now illuminates the hearts of the children of God. The very nature of this New Humanity prohibits any conformity to the current age, which is passing away and is, in a word, 'darkness.' But walking as 'children of light' is not something that believers must somehow stir up within themselves, or that the Church must energize through this or that program. Rather, Paul says, the same Spirit that raised Christ from the dead is now giving life to our mortal bodies and, through the *charismata*, is equipping each member of the Church to the edification of itself in love. "His ethic does not proceed from an evaluation of man's capabilities but from a recognition of the divine imperative. And Paul understands man's response to be an expression of God's power to redeem and transform, not of man's power to comply and perform."⁴³⁸ So distinct does Paul view what God is doing in and through the Church, that he refers to her as a 'new man,' or as 'one man,' both a clear reference and contrast to the first man of Creation, Adam. There is no fellowship between the Last Adam and the first, and so there can be no fellowship between the sons of the first Adam and the children of the Last.

The natural and inevitable relationship, then, between the Children of Light and *this present darkness*, will be at best tension, at worst tribulation. Evangelicals must disabuse themselves of Constantinian triumphalism, the notion that the Church will somehow impact culture 'for Christ,' and thereby bring in the kingdom. "A tension exists for the Christian community, a community caught in the unavoidable pull between history and revelation; between the conditions of social life in any particular epoch and the call

⁴³⁷ Furnish; 216.

⁴³⁸ *Ibid.*; 238.

of God on the church.”⁴³⁹ And evangelicals, especially in the West, must resist the opposite reaction of despair, the hopelessness that often accompanies the inevitable decline of Christianity’s impact in the social sphere. This reaction is simply the emotional response to the failure of the former attempt – one cannot be discouraged by failing something one never tried, especially if one was not meant to try it in the first place.

There is (at least) one more thing that modern evangelicals should stop doing: turning Christianity into an adjective for marketing purposes. There are several reasons for this, the most obvious being the crass consumerism that has always marketed on religion (*cp.* I Tim. 6:5). Fundamentally, though, the adjective ‘Christian’ placed in front of ‘musician’ or ‘plumber’ is little more than the assimilative approach to the surrounding culture, adopting and adapting to the ways of life within the surrounding culture but ‘christianizing’ it with the adjective. This is not to say, of course, that a Christian who is a plumber ought to do his plumbing in any other manner than a non-believing competitor – though one would hope the former would do his work with greater integrity. It is rather that music or plumbing have nothing essential to do with what Christianity *is*, and the fact that this or that musician is a believer ought to become evident through other, deeper channels than placing the adjective ‘Christian’ on one’s business card.

Hunter also points out that this practice also insinuates a duality within culture, by which Jesus Christ is Lord over one plumber but not over the other. Granted, the ‘Christian’ plumber is often merely wanting to indicate that he has acknowledged that Jesus is Lord in his life, and may be unaware that by doing so via the adjective ‘Christian’ plumber he is falling into a ‘triumphalism’ whereby the Church is taking over culture for Jesus. Hunter writes, “For Christians to regard the work of culture in any literal sense as ‘kingdom-building’ this side of heaven is to begin with an assumption that tends to lead to one version or another of the Constantinian project, in which the objective is for Christians to ‘take over’ the culture, fashioning all of the world in the image

⁴³⁹ Hunter, *To Change the World*; 230.

of the church or at least in accord with its values.”⁴⁴⁰ Paul exhorts believers to labor *as unto the Lord*, knowing that their labor will receive its due reward from Him, even without the adjective.⁴⁴¹

Faithful Presence

While it is counterintuitive, especially in a modern democracy, to *not* try to change the culture around us, and *not even* attempt to slow down the regression of cultural traditions and morals, the typical, political approach has just not worked. Nor has the Church’s chronic bouts with social activism had any appreciable impact even in reducing the speed of culture’s moral decline. Indeed, one would be hard pressed from a historical perspective to give a passing grade to the various evangelistic methods, mission organizations, or rallies with regard to a tangible change in the surrounding and prevailing culture. Is it possible, even biblical, that the Church was never intended to change the culture in the midst of which she lived? If Paul’s view that each and every age *is passing away*, is there any point in trying to change it? Furthermore, as we have seen in this study, the Church in its political and/or social activist mode often fails to properly understand both *the powers* against which it fights and *the weapons* with which it fights them. Paul speaks to both, but all too often the Church is no longer listening. “Too many ideologies claim to promote the common weal have failed...to appreciate the reality of the power of sin and the inescapable constraints of the eschatological tension.”⁴⁴² The ‘Now and the Not Yet’ constitutes a very real paradigm for the Church, though not for the world. Thus, when the Church meets the World on its own turf and engages with the World’s own means and weapons, she has abandoned the hope of the Not Yet for the empty promises of cultural changes in the Now. “Fighting the battle of the kingdom with the enemy’s weapons meant that one had already lost it in principle,

⁴⁴⁰ *Ibid.*; 233.

⁴⁴¹ Colossians 3:17

⁴⁴² Dunn; 672.

and would soon lose it terribly in practice.”⁴⁴³ Two thousand years of Church history has proven this statement accurate; perhaps it is time to try a different approach.

James Hunter powerfully concludes in his *To Change the World*, that culture is remarkable resilient to change, especially conscious efforts at change. He shows quite conclusively that culture is far too complex a concept to be easily subjected to social or political modifications; people are changed by culture far more than people change culture itself. This is why we have concluded that Niebuhr’s approach, while an accurate historical summary of the Church *has done* with respect to culture over the millennia, the five paradigms he lists are all deficient in terms of what the Church *should* do. Hunter himself proposes the solution of *Faithful Presence*. This is neither engagement nor disengagement with the world, but rather the community of faith living in faithfulness to the Lord both *in the midst* and *in the presence* of the surrounding culture. As has been noted several times before, this was Israel’s intended *modus operandi* upon entering and inhabiting the Promised Land.

Surely I have taught you statutes and judgments, just as the LORD my God commanded me, that you should act according to them in the land which you go to possess. Therefore be careful to observe them; for this is your wisdom and your understanding in the sight of the peoples who will hear all these statutes, and say, ‘Surely this great nation is a wise and understanding people.

(Deuteronomy 4:5-6)

One might argue that this exhortation applied solely to Israel as a theocracy; for a distinct geographical place and time. It is certainly true that no group of Christians since the Ascension has ever formed a ‘Christian Nation,’ and that there is no biblical justification for establishing any nation as a theocracy under Christ, the underlying point of Moses’ admonition is the concept of *witness*: the people of God are intended in this life and in this world to present themselves as living testimonies to the grace of God. This purpose has not changed, as Peter makes abundantly clear in his first epistle.

⁴⁴³ Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God*; 595.

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Beloved, I beg you as sojourners and pilgrims, abstain from fleshly lusts which war against the soul, having your conduct honorable among the Gentiles, that when they speak against you as evildoers, they may, by your good works which they observe, glorify God in the day of visitation.

(I Peter 2:11-12)

Once again it must be said that the purpose of the Church as witness absolutely forbids monasticism or any other form of isolation by the Church from the world. But it also does not mean ‘engagement’ in the sense that has so often described the interaction between the Church and the world. Hauerwas and Willimon comment, “In saying ‘The church doesn’t have a social strategy, the church *is* a social strategy,’ we are attempting to indicate an alternative way of looking at the political, social significance of the church...The church is not out of the world. There is no other place for the church to be but here.”⁴⁴⁴

David Wells, in his *God in the Wilderness* sequel to *No Place for Truth*, gleans from his study of the New Testament, and especially of Paul, that the Church has almost wholly lost sight of both its true identity and its true mission. Indeed, the latter flows from the former and if there is misconception as to identity there will be failure as to purpose. Wells writes, “the church is going to have to get much more serious about itself, cease trying to be a supermarket serving the needs of religious consumers, and become instead a force of countercultural spirituality that draws from the interconnected lives of its members and is expressed through their love, service, worship, understanding, and proclamation.”⁴⁴⁵ What Wells calls ‘interconnectedness,’ Paul would probably refer to as a ‘one another,’ with the emphasis being on the mutual edification provided by the *charismata* within the assembly of the church. This is, as we have seen, Temple-building, and this is what God is doing through Christ Jesus in His Church. “But the point is this: that there is one building, one Temple, one place where the living God has chosen to live. It consists, now, of all those who belong to the Messiah, all those who are indwelt by his spirit.”⁴⁴⁶

⁴⁴⁴ Hauerwas & Willimon, *Resident Aliens*; 38.

⁴⁴⁵ Wells, *God in the Wilderness*; 215.

⁴⁴⁶ Wright, *Paul and the Faithfulness of God*; 392.

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Unfortunately to many, the Faithful Presence will seem too quiescent, with too little ‘action’ to combat the evil in the world, to save our children and our rights, etc. Too many have bought into the lie that ‘the only thing necessary for evil to triumph is for good men to do nothing.’ This is a false dichotomy on several levels, but the most pertinent in this summary chapter is that the ‘good’ that believers might do, by the grace of God, is intended to testify to His glory, not to change the world. Paul indeed admonishes believers to ‘do good,’ and will not even allow that ‘doing good’ to be limited to within the church, though fellow believers are the primary recipients: *“Therefore, as we have opportunity, let us do good to all, especially to those who are of the household of faith.”*⁴⁴⁷ But Hunter points out that even this ‘do-gooding’ must have a different basis and purpose than trying to change the world. Emphasizing his point, he writes in italics, *“If there are benevolent consequences of our engagement with the world, it is precisely because it is **not** rooted in a desire to change the world for the better but rather because it is an expression of a desire to honor the creator of all goodness, beauty, and truth, a manifestation of our loving obedience to God, and a fulfillment of God’s command to love our neighbor.”*⁴⁴⁸

This Faithful Presence cannot come about by denying the urge to engage in the social or political forum, since as citizens of this world we must so engage. It also does not come about by engaging in a different manner, by quoting Scripture instead of the Constitution, for instance. In an ironic twist so typical of God’s methods, the Church is least impactful to its surrounding culture when it most tries change culture, and most impactful when it most tries to be the Church as chartered by the New Testament. *“Ecclesiology, then, is the form by which engagement with the world takes place.”*⁴⁴⁹ The real question, then, is not whether the Church can or should change the culture, but whether the inevitable changes in culture serves to change the identity and purpose of the Church. Conservative evangelicals lament the ‘acculturation’ of the apostle Paul – how liberal theologians dismiss Pauline exhortations and restrictions as being ‘part of the apostle’s culture.’ The implication is that the Church in a different culture need not

⁴⁴⁷ Galatians 6:10

⁴⁴⁸ Hunter; 234.

⁴⁴⁹ *Ibid.*; 158.

adhere to what Paul has to say. But do not conservative evangelicals do the very same thing when it comes to what Paul says regarding the Church's position vis-à-vis social and political activism? Take, for example, the passage in Romans 13 in which Paul enjoins submission to governing authorities. How many evangelical pulpits have side-stepped Paul's teachings in this passage on the basis of modern republican democracy being so vastly different than ancient imperialism? But to Paul there was a transcendent reality of the New Creation, within which the New Humanity was to live according to entirely different principles from the surrounding culture, regardless of the age in which his letters would be read. Thus he writes immediately after his treatise on government,

Render therefore to all their due: taxes to whom taxes are due, customs to whom customs, fear to whom fear, honor to whom honor. Owe no one anything except to love one another, for he who loves another has fulfilled the law. For the commandments, "You shall not commit adultery," "You shall not murder," "You shall not steal," "You shall not bear false witness," "You shall not covet," and if there is any other commandment, are all summed up in this saying, namely, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." Love does no harm to a neighbor; therefore love is the fulfillment of the law. And do this, knowing the time, that now it is high time to awake out of sleep; for now our salvation is nearer than when we first believed. The night is far spent, the day is at hand. Therefore let us cast off the works of darkness, and let us put on the armor of light. Let us walk properly, as in the day, not in revelry and drunkenness, not in lewdness and lust, not in strife and envy. But put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to fulfill its lusts. (Romans 13:7-14)

It is an illegitimate hermeneutic that rejects the first half of Romans 13 on the basis of different governing paradigms, while accepting the second half as 'timeless' ethical teaching. It is rather the case that submission to government, in any age and under any form of government, is the manifestation of that good citizenship that promotes the cause of Christ rather than hindering it. Christian submission to government is not on the basis of agreement with the government, nor of fear that the government might take away the believer's rights, property, or even life. It is rather based on a higher government under which the believer, and the Church, lives and to which it is ultimately responsible. This submission flows from the knowledge that the real 'powers and princi-

palities' have been thoroughly defeated by Jesus Christ through the Cross, His victory announced in no uncertain terms by the Resurrection (*cp.* Acts 17:30-31). Victor Furnish writes of believers of all eras, "Their present life is already qualified by their ultimate destiny...Although still in the world they are not oriented toward 'earthly' things but toward the age which is to come."⁴⁵⁰

Another reason why the Church can afford to submit to the prevailing government is that there is a different 'law,' a different social structure, a different economic paradigm within the Church – or at least there should be. This really is the essence of the 'Faithful Presence,' that the Church in any age and in any cultural milieu is itself an 'embedded culture,' a culture that lives within the prevailing culture and, as such, opposes that metaculture. Lynn Cohick writes of, "...Paul's



Lynn Cohick (b. 1962)

theological conviction that Christ's work creates a new humanity, a singular fellowship that defies human social and cultural codes and challenges the cosmic forces. This redeemed body of Christ stands as a testimony to the world of God's unfathomable grace to all and his promise that all will be made right in the end."⁴⁵¹

This is the heart and soul of the Faithful Presence, the knowledge that God has inaugurated the New Creation in and through Jesus Christ. He has ransomed and resurrected a people to Himself through the regeneration and indwelling of the Holy Spirit, and in them is building Himself a new and true Temple. "As a result, it is clear that Paul is not content with the idea of God once again filling an earthly sanctuary with his presence, nor with the thought that God will again dwell with his people after the exile. Rather, in lieu of God dwelling *with* his people in a temple they have built for him, God now dwells *in* his people and *they* are his temple."⁴⁵² The practical manifestation of the Church, and of churches, as temples seems to be a pronounced theme in Paul's letter to the Ephesian church. We have seen how he understands Christ's work on the cross as

⁴⁵⁰ Furnish; 127

⁴⁵¹ Cohick, Lynn in *The Apostle Paul and the Christian Life*, Scot McKnight & Joseph B. Modica, eds; 45.

⁴⁵² Wardle; 214.

uniting the ‘two’ – Jews and Gentiles – into ‘one new man,’ that is, Jesus Himself. Paul writes of all believers corporately being *“built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus being the corner stone, in whom the whole building, being fitted together is growing into a holy temple...”*⁴⁵³

Paul then says nothing about the Church changing the culture around it, choosing to focus the rest of his letter on the interpersonal relationships within the Ephesian congregation, just as he does in all his letters. The consistent note of ‘separatedness’ enters in with the admonition, *“This I say, therefore, and affirm together with the Lord, that you walk no longer just as the Gentiles also walk, in the futility of their mind.”*⁴⁵⁴ This seems to be all the ink he is willing to spill regarding the outside world; his concern is the behavior of the community of faith as it builds itself up in love (*cp.* 4:12-16). So many passages might be quoted just from this one epistle; a few will suffice to show the thrust of Paul’s message that the focus of the Church must be the Church, not the world.

Therefore, putting away lying, “Let each one of you speak truth with his neighbor,” for we are members of one another. “Be angry, and do not sin”: do not let the sun go down on your wrath, nor give place to the devil. Let him who stole steal no longer, but rather let him labor, working with his hands what is good, that he may have something to give him who has need. Let no corrupt word proceed out of your mouth, but what is good for necessary edification, that it may impart grace to the hearers. And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, by whom you were sealed for the day of redemption. Let all bitterness, wrath, anger, clamor, and evil speaking be put away from you, with all malice. And be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, even as God in Christ forgave you. (Ephesians 4:25-32)

The chapter divisions in Ephesians seem to be among the most arbitrary anywhere, as Paul continues his exhortation on community life straight through Chapter 5 and on into Chapter 6. The apostle does not mention interaction between the Church and the world apart from the Church keeping itself separate and undefiled (which, by the way, is how James defines true religion). The exhortations in Paul’s letter to the Ephesians are nothing less than the fleshing out of his Old Testament reference in II Corinthians, the mission statement of the people of God in the world,

⁴⁵³ Ephesians 2:20-21

⁴⁵⁴ Ephesians 4:17

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Do not be unequally yoked together with unbelievers. For what fellowship has righteousness with lawlessness? And what communion has light with darkness? And what accord has Christ with Belial? Or what part has a believer with an unbeliever? And what agreement has the temple of God with idols? For you are the temple of the living God. As God has said:

“I will dwell in them and walk among them.

I will be their God, and they shall be My people.”

Therefore

“Come out from among them and be separate, says the Lord.

Do not touch what is unclean, and I will receive you.

I will be a Father to you, and you shall be My sons and daughters,”

Says the LORD Almighty.

(II Corinthians 6:14-18)

These communities of faith scattered and growing in the midst of the Roman Empire, were unique microcosms of the New Creation promised and inaugurated, though not yet consummated. Scot McKnight comments on the Pauline mission and missiology, “the mission of the apostle Paul is to form fellowships in separate cities that



Scot McKnight (b. 1953)

embody a new sociopolitical and economic and spiritual order – one body made of others and unlikes, a ‘fellowship of different.’”⁴⁵⁵ The Church needs to return to this biblical truth and then, and only then, will the divinely intended impact be realized – though the effect of that impact may just as well be persecution as revival. The point of Paul’s entire message with reference to the Church in the world, is that the re-

sponse of the world does not matter. Indeed, the hope of the Church has always shown brightest during times of greatest persecution, when the faith of God’s people steadfastly maintains its hold upon the divine promises and the divine faithfulness. This hope is, ultimately, the greatest witness of the Church to the world and, consequently, the most powerful evangelism it possesses. Jürgen Moltmann sums it up well, “The whole body of Christians is engaged in an apostolate of hope for the world and finds therein its essence – namely, that which makes it the Church of God...This does not mean merely salvation of the soul, individual rescue from the evil world, comfort for the troubled

⁴⁵⁵ McKnight, Scot, *The Apostle Paul and the Christian Life*; 145.

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conscience, but also the realization of the eschatological *hope of justice*, the *humanizing* of man, the *socializing* of humanity, *peace* for all creation."⁴⁵⁶

It is hard to overstate the profound impact true Christian communities, living in the light of the New Creation as the New Humanity – indeed, living as *light* – in the midst of darkness that is passing away, must have on the surrounding culture. Not to change it, and perhaps not even to inhibit the progressive corruption of every age, but rather simply to show forth the glory of God's grace in the community of those whom He has saved and adopted. "Here Christian congregations can offer human warmth and nearness, neighborliness and homeliness, 'community' which is not utilitarian but nevertheless meaningful, and therefore also readily called 'genuine'...They have become islands of genuine co-humanity and of authentic life in the rough sea of circumstances which the ordinary man can after all do nothing to alter."⁴⁵⁷ In spite of all her efforts to either avoid culture or dominate culture or subtly change culture, the Church must know deep down that her proper response to any culture is to simply be the Church, to the glory of God through Jesus Christ. Hauerwas and Willimon write, "The church knows that its most credible form of witness (and the most 'effective' thing it can do for the world) is the actual creation of a living, breathing, visible community of faith."⁴⁵⁸ Hunter add, "Indeed, insofar as Christians acknowledge the rule of God in all aspects of their lives, their engagement with the world proclaims the shalom to come."⁴⁵⁹ Peace that the Church already possesses in Jesus Christ and through His indwelling and empowering Spirit, peace that the world can neither give nor take away.

See then that you walk circumspectly, not as fools but as wise, redeeming the time, because the days are evil. Therefore do not be unwise, but understand what the will of the Lord is. And do not be drunk with wine, in which is dissipation; but be filled with the Spirit, speaking to one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody in your heart to the Lord, giving thanks always for all things to God the Father in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.

(Ephesians 5:15-20)

⁴⁵⁶ Moltmann; 329-29.

⁴⁵⁷ *Ibid.*; 320.

⁴⁵⁸ Hauerwas & Willimon, *Resident Aliens*; 47.

⁴⁵⁹ Hunter; 234.