

IX

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9Marks Journal

Biblical Thinking for Building Healthy Churches



VANISHING CHURCH?

Seeking the Right Perspective
as Opposition Grows



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Jonathan Leeman

Editor's Note

It's common to interpret Jesus' Matthew 5 words about "salt" to refer to the church's work of cultural preservation. The trouble is, the Sermon on the Mount is not about preserving the old but presenting the new. It characterizes the ethic of a new humanity. That's why I think Tom Schreiner offers the better interpretation when he says the word "salt" in this context is about the call on churches to be distinct (*New Testament Theology*).

What good is a church if it loses its distinctness? It is no longer good for anything except to be thrown out and trampled under people's feet.

The growing opposition to the Christian faith in Western culture is heart breaking and worth challenging. That said, God has good purposes for letting the nations—even a so-called Christian nation—oppose his people. And one of them is to sharpen the church's distinctness. He is seeking a bride for his Son, and he means for her to radiate.

The nature of our relationships inside a church should be distinct. Our ways of serving our employers and employees should be distinct. Our treatment of spouses and children should be distinct. Our loves and our laughter should be distinct. Our sexuality and family budgets and vacation plans should be distinct. And the more our culture opposes God and his people, the more the distinctness of our churches should shine. Yes, there should be points of commonality. We never stop being human, and our lives and loves should be deeply humane. But we are the new humanity. Our neighbors should find us both familiar and exotic.

Notice, then, the further a nation moves away from Christian moral assumptions, the more its churches have occasion to radiate the life-changing power of God. Which means, cultural opposition shouldn't scare us. It sets a backdrop for the display for the glory of God in our lives.

Not only that, our evangelistic power is tied to our distinctness. An old friend of mine known as a Christian who works deep in the heart of British politics recently affirmed gay marriage. He doesn't know it today, but a couple decades from now he just might look back and see that he lost all his prophetic power on the day he made that affirmation. He blended in. He became indistinct. His salt was no longer salty. Might as well throw it out.

How precious for evangelism's sake are our doctrines of sin and conversion.

As cultural opposition grows, in short, church leaders must not be all lament. Or all battle-cry. There might be places for both. But pastors must preach hope, recognizing divine purposefulness in that very opposition. God is behind it. We should not presume to know what God is specifically doing through any moment of opposition, but we can assume that all the purposes for his church are love.

The goal of this 9Marks Journal is to help pastors adopt a fuller perspective regarding the growing cultural opposition all around us. How should we think? How should we speak and pray? They might subpoena our sermons or fine our florists. But the game is God's, and he moves his opponents about like pawns.



By Timothy Larsen

Cheerful Confidence after Christendom

The Preacher warns, “He who quarries stones is hurt by them, and he who splits logs is endangered by them” ([Eccl 10:9](#)). I have always thought of that as the law of occupational hazards.

I’m a historian. Therefore, one of the professional dangers that I most need to guard against is nostalgia. I can all too easily slip into longing for the good old days when public entertainment was more wholesome; children were more dutiful; biblical knowledge was more widespread; and so on. Fortunately, the Preacher also has advice to meet my very case: “Say not, ‘Why were the former days better than these?’ For it is not wisdom that you ask this” ([Eccl 7:10](#)).

THANK GOD FOR GRANTING US NOW

God has granted me the privilege to live now—in my own times. To wish otherwise is not only pointless, it is ungrateful. It is also self-defeating. Every season of life has its own joys. Foolishness is to want to have the joys of adulthood when still a teenager or the joys of adolescence when middle aged and so on.

Likewise, there are unique joys, privileges, and opportunities for serving God in each generation. We are called not to hanker after a different age, but rather to jump in with relish to following Christ at this moment. There is an old Puritan saying: “If you would make the greatest success of your life, try to discover what God is doing in your time, and fling yourself into the accomplishment of his purpose and will.”

YES, THERE ARE UNIQUE CHALLENGES

Our times, of course, have unique challenges. We are witnessing the dissolution of Christendom. Christendom was a long period of time in the West when Christian commitments and beliefs were buoyed up by political and cultural supports. In Christendom, there were worldly incentives to at least pretend to believe Christian doctrine and to observe Christian practices. To do so was good for one’s professional and social success.

The notorious eighteenth-century religious skeptic David Hume actually advised his non-believing friends to fake a Christian identity, even cynically to pursue the Christian ministry as a good career move: “I wish it were still in my power to be a hypocrite in this particular. The common duties of society usually require it.” With such worldly prompts gone, the result is inevitably a culture in which many more people are willing to openly reject the Christian way of life.

This is certainly not all good. I prefer a culture where people refrain from making obscene comments because they want to maintain the illusion of being more righteous than they are.

BUT THERE ARE GAINS AS WELL

Nevertheless, it is surely not all bad. It is a gain as well as loss to have a better sense of what is really going on in someone else's mind, heart, and imagination.

Despite some official political props remaining in place, the decline of Christendom is much further along in Britain than it is in America. I lived in Britain for some years and was struck by the extraordinarily high Christian commitment of the people in the churches I attended. Over and over again, I witnessed a minister explain that the kingdom of God would be advanced if a vital Christian church was planted in a town or region currently without one. What was the response? A half dozen or more families would cheerfully decide to move there to make it happen. They would sell their homes, quit their jobs, and set off on an adventure of faith.

Meanwhile, I knew Christians in America who were planning to move across the country because, quite literally, they liked the weather in another region better. They seemed to assume that they would find a church and friends and the kingdom of God as may be, but they were going to seek first a place in the sun.

Again, one can go back and forth with listing the upsides and downsides, but the point is that there are upsides.

AND WEREN'T THE WORST TIMES ALSO THE BEST?

The darkest forecasts I hear anyone making now involve the post-Christendom period we are entering being like the pre-Christendom period before Emperor Constantine: a world in which the surrounding culture will decide that Christians are "haters of humanity" who deserve to be persecuted. There is probably a bit of paranoia in imagining that this one nation under God is just about to turn into something akin to the Roman Empire under Nero or Diocletian.

But let's face this imagined worst at least as a thought experiment. Were those not splendid times to serve God? Was the church defeated or triumphant? Were they not times when the power and blessing of God was manifest, when conversions were frequent, when discipleship was authentic? Where not even the most elite Roman pagans rattled by the intellectual confidence and resolve of figures such as Justin Martyr, Perpetua, and Polycarp?

SO CONFUSE THEM WITH CHEERFUL CONFIDENCE

The world is used to Christians who are alarmed, angry, fearful, despondent, grumpy. Such a posture only reinforces their complacent assumption that faith is a relic of the past which is in the process of passing away forever. I have found they are confused and intrigued by Christians who are confident, witty, and cheerful. They start to wonder if we know something they don't know about what is really true and how things are really going to turn out. And do we not?

Far from this being merely a tactic or form of capitulation, such a posture, at its best, can be an expression of faith—of confidence in the victory of God and the lordship of Christ. Who but Christians really believe that the story we inhabit ends as a comedy and not a tragedy?

Frederick Buechner once observed, "The place God calls you to is the place where your deep gladness and the world's deep hunger meet." Surely it is profoundly Christian and right to minister the gospel of Jesus Christ to a needy world out of a place of deep gladness.

THE CHURCH WILL PREVAIL – BE JOYFUL!

To believe that the gates of hell shall not prevail against the church is to not allow oneself to become defeatist. The right response to our times is one of faith and joy.

God is looking for men and women who are glad to be alive; who count as a privilege to be his servants at this moment; who are thrilled to be taking part in the coming of the kingdom of God in this generation.

To return to the Preacher by way of conclusion, he envisions someone who has learned “to accept his lot and rejoice in his toil” and is kept occupied by God “with joy in his heart” ([Eccl 5:19-20](#)). May their tribe increase.

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By Mark Dever

How to Survive a Cultural Crisis

Public opinion [appears to be changing](#) about same-sex marriage, as are the nation's laws. Of course this change is just one in a larger constellation. America's views on family, love, sexuality generally, tolerance, God, and so much more seems to be pushing in directions that put Bible-believing Christians on the defensive.

It's easy to feel like we've become the new "moral outlaws," to use Al Mohler's phrase. Standing up for historic Christian principles will increasingly get you in trouble socially and maybe economically, perhaps one day also criminally. It's ironic that Christians are told not to impose their views on others, even as the threat of job loss or other penalties loom over Christians for not toeing the new party line.

In all this, Christians are tempted to become panicked or to speak as alarmists. But to the extent we do, to that same extent we show we've embraced an unbiblical and nominal Christianity.

Here, then, are seven principles for surviving the very real cultural shifts we're presently enduring.

1. Remember that churches exist to work for supernatural change.

The whole Christian faith is based on the idea that God takes people who are spiritually dead and gives them new life. Whenever we evangelize, we are evangelizing the cemetery.

There's never been a time or a culture when it was natural to repent of your sins. That culture doesn't exist, it hasn't existed, it never will exist. Christians, churches, and pastors especially must know deep in their bones that we've always been about a work that's supernatural.

From that standpoint, recent cultural changes have made our job zero percent harder.

2. Understand that persecution is normal.

In the last few months I've been preaching through John's Gospel, and a number of people have thanked me for bringing out the theme of persecution. But I'm not convinced my preaching has changed; I think people's ears have changed. Recent events in the public square have caused people to become concerned about what's ahead for Christians. But if

you were to go back and listen to my old sermons—say, a series preached in the 1990s on 1 Peter— you’d discover that ordinary biblical exposition means raising the topic of persecution again and again.

Persecution is what Christians face in this fallen world. It’s what Jesus promised us (e.g., John 16).

Now, it may be that in God’s providence some Christians find themselves in settings where, even if they devote their lives to obeying Jesus, they won’t encounter insult and persecution. But don’t be fooled by the nice buildings in which so many churches meet. This Jesus we follow was executed as a state criminal.

One of my fellow pastors recently observed that, in the history of Christian persecution, it’s often secondary issues—not the gospel—that elicit persecution. Persecutors don’t say, “You believe in the gospel of Jesus Christ; I’m going to persecute you now.”

Rather, some belief or practice we maintain as Christians contradicts what people want or threatens their way of seeing the world. And so they oppose us.

Again, to the extent we respond to changes in our culture either with panic or alarmism, to that same extent we contradict the Bible’s teaching about ordinary Christian discipleship. It shows we’ve traded on the normalcy of nominalism.

Pastors especially should set the example in teaching their congregations not to play the victim. We should salt into our regular preaching and praying the normalcy of persecution. It’s the leader’s work to prepare churches for how we can follow Jesus, even if it means social criticism, or loss of privilege, or financial penalties, or criminal prosecution.

3. Eschew utopianism.

Christians should be a people of love and justice, and that means we should always strive to make our little corner of the globe a bit nicer than how we found it, whether that’s a kindergarten classroom or a kingdom. But even as we work for the sake of love and justice, we must remember we’re not going to transform this world into the kingdom of our Christ.

God hasn’t commissioned us to make this world perfect; he’s commissioned us chiefly to point to the One who will one day make it perfect, even as we spend our lives loving and doing good. If you’re tempted to utopianism, please observe that Scripture doesn’t allow it, and that the history of utopianism has a track record of distracting and deceiving even some of Christ’s most zealous followers.

It’s good to feel sadness over the growing approval given to sin in our day. But one of the reasons many Christians in America feel disillusionment over current cultural changes is that we’ve been somewhat utopian in our hopes. Again, to the extent you think and speak as an alarmist, to that same extent you demonstrate that utopian assumptions may have been motivating you all along.

4. Make use of our democratic stewardship.

I would be sad if anyone concluded from my comments that it doesn’t matter what Christians do publicly or with the state. Paul tells us to submit to the state. But in our democratic context, part of submitting to the state means sharing in its authority. And if we have a share in its authority, we just might have, to some extent, a share in its tyranny. To neglect the democratic process, so long as it’s in our hands, is to neglect a stewardship.

We cannot create Utopia, but that doesn’t mean we cannot be good stewards of what we have, or that we cannot use the democratic processes to bless others. For the sake of love and justice, we should make use of our democratic stewardship.

5. Trust the Lord, not human circumstances.

There's never been a set of circumstances Christians cannot trust God through. Jesus beautifully trusted the Father through the cross "for the joy set before him" ([Heb. 12:2](#)). Nothing you and I will face will amount to what our King had to suffer.

We can trust him. He will prove trustworthy through everything we might have to endure. And as we trust him, we will bear a beautiful testimony of God's goodness and power, and we will bring him glory.

6. Remember that everything we have is God's grace.

We must remember anything we receive less than hell is dancing time for Christians. Right? Everything a Christian has is all of grace. We need to keep that perspective so that we aren't tempted to become too sour toward our employers, our friends, our family members, and our government when they oppose us.

How was Paul able to sing in prison? He knew that of which he'd been forgiven. He knew the glory that awaited him. He perceived and prized these greater realities.

7. Rest in the certainty of Christ's victory.

The gates of hell will not prevail against the church of Jesus Christ. We need not fear and tremble as if Satan has *finally*, after all these millennia, gained the upper hand in his opposition to God through the same-sex marriage lobby.

"Oh, we might finally lose it here!" No, not a chance.

People around the world now and throughout history have suffered far more than Christians in America presently do. And we don't assume Satan had the upper hand there, do we?

Each nation and age has a unique way to express its depravity, to attack God. But none will succeed any more than the crucifixion succeeded in defeating Jesus. Yes, he died. But three days later he got up from the dead.

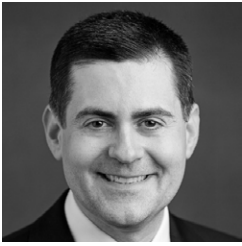
Christ's kingdom is in no danger of failing. Again, Christians, churches, and especially pastors must know this deeply in our bones. D-Day has happened. Now it's cleanup time. Not one person God has elected to save will fail to be saved because the secular agenda is "winning" in our time and place. There shouldn't be anxiety or desperation in us.

We may not be able to out-argue others. They may not be persuaded by our books and articles. But we can love them with the supernatural love God has shown to us in Christ. And we can make his Word known today—with humility, with confidence, and with joy.

Editor's note: This article [originally appeared](#) on The Gospel Coalition. Mark will be addressing this theme in his workshop at their [2015 National Conference](#), April 13 to 15, in Orlando, Florida.

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By Russell Moore

Left Behind in America: Following Christ after Culture Wars

As a child growing up in a Southern Baptist church, I learned my place in American culture through Rapture movies. These films—based on a pop-dispensationalist reading of prophecy—pictured a time when the church would be suddenly ripped from the earth, sailing through the air to be with the invisible (to the viewer) Jesus Christ. These films would always then picture the panic of those who were “left behind,” and would depict the societal chaos that would emerge once the “salt and light” of the culture was out of the way. What we never considered was that if such a Rapture were to happen, American culture might be relieved to be rid of us.

Historian Rick Perlstein notes the “culture wars” that ignited in the 1960s and 1970s were really about dueling secular prophecy charts. “What one side saw as liberation, the other side saw as apocalypse,” he writes, and vice-versa. It’s hard to argue with his thesis. The scenes of LSD-intoxicated college students frolicking nude in the mud of the Woodstock Festival in New York would seem horrifying to the salt-of-the-earth folk in Middle America for whom “the dawning of the Age of Aquarius” would seem like a threat. At the same time, Merle Haggard’s counter-revolutionary anthem would have the same effect, in reverse. The words, “We don’t smoke marijuana in Muskogee,” must seem like hell, if you’re in Woodstock.

FROM MAJORITY TO MINORITY

The problem with American Christianity is that we always assumed there were more of “us” than there were of “them.” And we were sometimes confused about who we meant when we said “us.”

The idea of the church as part of a “moral majority” was not started, or ended, by the political movement by that name. The idea was that most Americans shared common goals with Christianity, at least at the level of morality. This perception was helped along by the fact that it was, at least in some ways, true. Most Americans did identify with Christianity, and the goods of Christianity such as church-going and moral self-restraint were approved of by the culture as means toward molding good citizens, the kind that could withstand the ravages of the frontier or the challenges of global Communism. Mainstream American culture did aspire to at least the ideal of many of the things the Christian church talked about: healthy marriages, stable families, strong communities bound together by prayer.

“GOD AND COUNTRY” OR “CHRIST AND HIM CRUCIFIED”?

Now, politically and socially speaking, this is what a group is supposed to do: to attach itself to a broad coalition and to speak then as part of a majority. The problem was that, from the very beginning, Christian values were always more popular in American culture than the Christian gospel. That’s why one could speak with great acclaim, in almost any era of the nation’s history, of “God and country,” but would create cultural distance as soon as one mentioned “Christ and him crucified.” God was always welcome in American culture as the Deity charged with blessing America. The God who must be approached through the mediation of the blood of Christ was much more difficult to set to patriotic music or to “Amen” in a prayer at the Rotary Club.

Now, however, it is increasingly clear that American culture doesn’t just reject the particularities of orthodox, evangelical Christianity but also rejects key aspects of “traditional values.” This is seen politically in the way that the “wedge issues” of the “culture wars,” which once benefitted social conservatives, now benefit moral libertarians—from questions of sexuality to drug laws to public expressions of religion to the definition of the family. Turns out, they *do* smoke marijuana in Muskogee.

THE PATH FORWARD

This leaves American Christianity pondering the path forward from here. The alternative that many will find is some form of a siege mentality. Some will retain the illusion of a previously Christian America, and will grow all the angrier, thinking that we have lost something that rightly belonged to us. And some will wish to simply absorb into the larger culture in their secular lives, while carving out counter-cultures in their churches to hold fast to the gospel. I would argue though that the cultural tumult around us is no cause for either the clenching of the fists or the wringing of the hands.

We ought to see the ongoing cultural shake-up in America as a liberation of sorts from a captivity we never even knew we were in. The closeness of American culture with the church caused many sectors of the American church to read the Bible as though the Bible were pointing us to America itself. That’s why endless recitations of 2 Chronicles 7:14 all focused on revival in the nation as a means to national blessing, without ever asking who the “my people” of this text actually are, and what it means, in light of the gospel, to be “blessed.”

And that’s why in the most culturally conservative parts of the country, Christianity often became a rite of passage to a place in the community, often without the self-crucifying power of regeneration. To be a good American in the Bible Belt meant one was born to be born again. In this context, the gospel seemed far less strange than it did to both the religious Jewish and pagan Greek contexts of the New Testament witness. We may now be forced, at last, to understand who “we” are, and to see that we can be Americans best if we are not Americans first.

The church now has the opportunity to bear witness in a culture that often does not even pretend to share our “values.” That is not a tragedy since we were never given a mission to promote “values” in the first place, but to speak instead of sin and of righteousness and of judgment, of Christ and his kingdom. We will now have to articulate concepts we previously assumed—concepts such as “marriage” and “family” and “faith” and “religion.” So much the better, since Jesus and the apostles do the same thing, defining these categories in terms of creation and of the gospel. We should have been doing this all along. Now we will be forced to, simply in order to be understood at all.

WE ARE NOT LOSERS

Above all, we should approach American culture without panic or anger. This will be difficult. We will see things happening that we do, and should, lament, things that were kept from happening by the veneer of American civil religion. Moreover, there will always be those who will set up a kind of protection racket, labeling the intensity of Christian

conviction on the basis of the theatrical force of expressed outrage. Such responses, though, are the tactics of losers. And we are not losers.

Our end goal is not a Christian America of the made-up past or the hoped-for future. Our end goal is the kingdom of Christ, made up of every tribe, tongue, nation, and language. We are, in Christ, the heirs of this kingdom. The worst thing that can happen to us is not cultural marginalization or social setbacks. The worst thing that can happen to us is crucifixion under the curse of God, and we've already been there. The best thing that can happen to us has already happened, too. We are raised with Christ, and seated with him at the right hand of God. That should free us to stand and to speak, not because we are a majority, moral or otherwise, but because we are an embassy of the future, addressing consciences made to long for good news.

The shifts in American culture have made those Rapture movies turn out to be prophetic, in more ways than one. A Rapture indeed is happening, but those who are evaporating in front of us are those structures of nominal, cultural Christianity. Good riddance. We will march onward as those with a gospel to preach and a kingdom to serve. We may be maligned and we may be misunderstood, but we have not been left behind.

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By Bruce Kent

Thank God for . . . Government?

The criticism of government is probably as old as government itself, but it seems en vogue of late. A recent Gallup poll found that only nine percent of Americans said they have a “great deal” of confidence in the federal government when it comes to handling international problems, while nearly one in five said they had no confidence at all in Uncle Sam. Both numbers were lower when respondents offered their perspective on the federal government’s handling of domestic policies.

Often there are real blunders and evils that deserve a response. From corrupt local officials taking bribes, to congressmen who implode in scandal, to ineffective federal agencies, the failures of all levels of government are well-known to us. Government officials are rightly held to a higher bar than others, since their decisions and actions impact the public in unique ways.

Even stinging criticisms of government can be a kind of crude barometer of the degree of freedom of expression citizens enjoy. In some countries, the only “news outlets” are PR organs of the central government, like in North Korea. Even in Hong Kong, peaceful protests in critique of governmental actions have provoked harsh crackdowns by police. We can praise God for the freedoms of religion, assembly, and press that we enjoy.

Many criticisms of government also almost serve as proxies for larger debates over the role and size of government and its relationship to families, culture, industries, and private sector endeavors. These debates are deeply important and constructive in a free society.

But have you noticed how quickly substantive critique can quickly devolve into ungodly criticism? There is a fine line between the legitimate—even needed—criticism of a failed policy, and the caustic critique driven merely by egoism, partisan tribalism, or score-settling.

Unfettered, unrestrained critiques of government can be subtly corrosive—especially for evangelical Christians. Believers know how easily ugliness wells up in our hearts. So how do we honor God by not crossing the line between legitimate criticism and sinful bomb-throwing?

Not only that, how do we give real thanks for a gift that God has given?

The Apostle Peter says to “Honor the emperor.” The Apostle Paul teaches that a government official is “God’s servant for your good” who should be respected and obeyed with a clean conscience. Our obedience to authority reflects to a watching world our fear of God and respect of his sovereign, ultimate authority.

Many suggest Paul gave his readers a general instruction, not a blanket statement. Certainly, Paul was no Pollyanna. After all, he was a citizen of the Roman Empire—an empire built through bloody conquest on the backs of conquered kingdoms. He understood something of the evils that can be perpetrated by fallen, human governments. Paul knew the same Roman army occupying Jerusalem was complicit in killing Jesus.

There is a place to discuss what responses are appropriate for Christians when a government fails, embraces systematized evil, corruption, violence, or even bad policies that dishonor people made in God’s image. There is an article to be written there, too, as a helpful complement to this one.

But Paul’s focus in Romans 13 was not on the character of the government itself; his focus was on the character of *God*. Paul was teaching that our response to the authority of the government is part of our honoring God by respecting all God-given authorities, whether in the church, family, or government. So, for our purposes here, consider these four practical steps for cultivating a heart that demonstrates a biblical kind of honor and gratitude for the God-ordained authorities of government.

First, trust that God has ordained these authorities, and that obeying them is honoring him.

For instance, you honor God by paying your taxes. Did you know the IRS could be an agent of your sanctification?

God is sovereign and rules over all. We can trust his provision for us in our obedience in all circumstances. We can honor God by our obedience, even as we wait in long lines for construction permits, navigate a cumbersome process at the DMV, or wait at a stop light. In these quiet, routine moments, as law-abiding, authority-honoring Christians, we can bear witness to God and his ultimate authority.

Second, meditate on how government punishes evil.

Government officials, Paul says, are “agents of wrath to bring punishment on the wrongdoer.”

Local governments take drunk drivers off the streets and slap fines on people who endanger others by running red lights and stop signs. Police and firefighters respond to calls of alarm, distress from physical and material threats. Law enforcement thwarts burglars, murderers, and thieves. They protect children from abusive parents and remove them from dangerous situations.

Praise God for that!

State and federal governments prosecute corrupt corporate and political leaders, thus providing more integrity and accountability in our commercial and civil arenas. They seek out and prosecute criminals who perpetrate unspeakable acts of evil, preying on children, the frail, and the elderly. Such officials apprehend and prosecute purveyors of child pornography and abuse. They thwart extremists and terrorists. They stop bombers and shooters. They enforce our laws against those who would use their wealth, power, status, or fame to harm people financially, emotionally, or physically.

Praise God for them!

While some—even in recent months—have been harmed by government officials who were supposed to protect them, such tragedies can provide a stark reminder of the imperfections and injustices of any human authority. In these darker moments, our hearts can be helped, even healed, by putting our hope in God and his perfect authority.

But even in these darker moments, a ray of light breaks through when we remember there are responsible individuals in government who seek to serve and protect their fellow citizens each day.

Praise God for them. What a wonderful common grace blessing their service can be to help provide security for those made in God's image.

Third, reflect on how government can uphold the common good.

This is what Paul means in saying that government's role is to be a "servant for good." Like any good authority, when governmental authority is exercised with restraint and respect for those made in the image of God, the result can be life-giving, increasing the opportunities for the development and use of people's God-given talents and skills.

Just think about how much good is done by a local city instituting laws to oversee and operate an integrated delivery system for clean water. How much more time is freed up for the study and teaching of God's Word than if every household had to maintain their own well? How many families and children are spared from illness and disease because the water is clean and pure?

Praise God for the men and women who help design systems to provide clean water for millions of people.

Or consider the role of government in enforcing laws related to commerce and the workplace. How many men and women are protected by government actions who would otherwise be exploited by monopolies or unethical business practices? We need only look at the work conditions and living situations of workers in some countries—or the black market in our own country—to see the benefit of clear rules that are consistently enforced.

One more example: air traffic controllers. Every day some 15,000 personnel at more than 300 locations help guide more than 87,000 flights around the nation. Every day. It is a huge operation. What good benefits come from the passenger and freight travel by air.

Praise God for the men and women who help operate a system which brings order out of chaos, which provides safety amidst risk.

Think about the common grace benefit of government officials who help establish and maintain our highway system, who test the safety of consumer vehicles or pharmaceutical drugs, or who inspect our borders, passports, ships, or bridges. Much of governmental work in enforcing laws helps establish safety and create order so that men and women made in the image of God may flourish.

Do you know anyone that has any of these jobs? Who do you know that works in government prosecuting evil or upholding good? Have you considered what it looks like to honor their role?

Have you thanked God for them? This brings us to a fourth point.

Finally, consider biblical examples of those who have honored God in government service.

God used believers in pagan governments to protect his people. Joseph served in Egypt's government and ultimately provided refuge and food for Jacob and his sons in a severe famine. Queen Esther won the king's favor and saved a people from genocide. Daniel and the three Hebrew boys, as war refugees, proclaimed God's truth before pagan kings and helped secure the freedom to worship God.

These are just a few examples of people who God used in government, not just to advance the good of a people, but to advance the glory of God. How would your heart toward the authority of government change if you started praying for Christian brothers and sisters in government to have wisdom in their work and boldness in their witness for the Gospel?

As Christians, we know that even the best of men are men at best. Even the most impressive government official is sinful and fallible. So while we never trust the individuals or institutions of government more than we trust God, we can praise God that he will preserve a remnant—in government—to bear witness to his goodness and advance his aims.

We can be thankful for the authorities God has ordained to punish evil and to uphold a common good. Remembering God's sovereignty, and his ultimate authority, can help us avoid sinful behaviors like ad hominem attacks or ugly name calling—even when making critiques of governmental authorities we seek to obey.

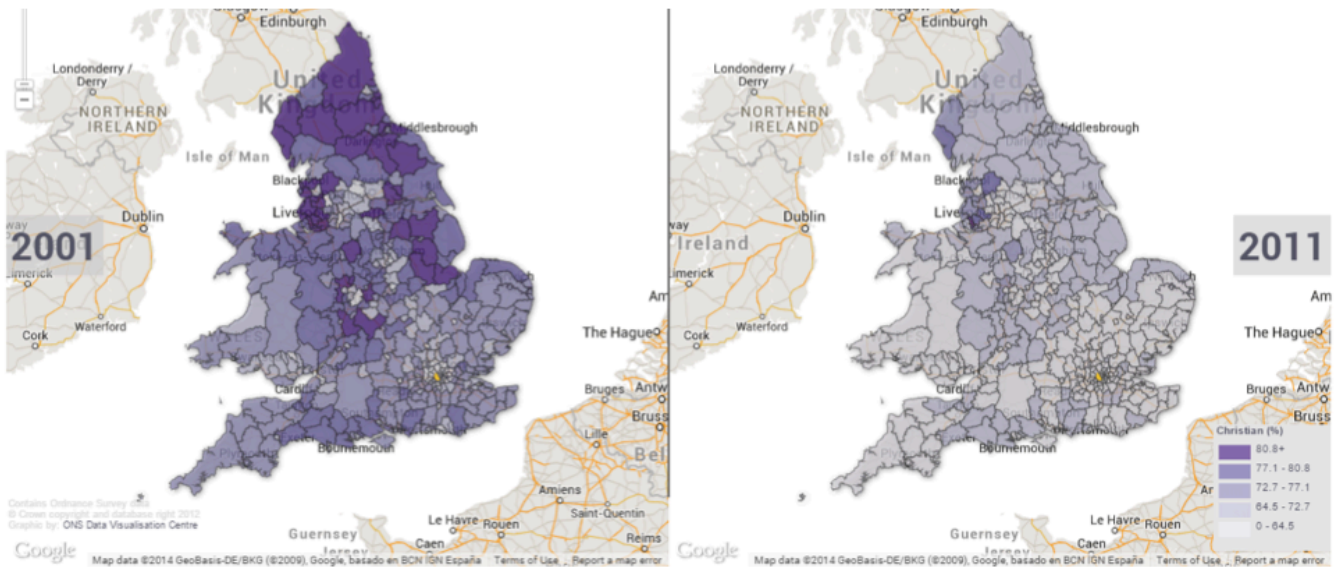
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By Mike Gilbert-Smith

Is Christianity in Britain in Terminal Decline?



Map of declining Christianity in England and Wales ¹

Is Christianity in Britain in terminal decline? ⁱⁱ

It is far too early to sign the church’s death warrant; reports of its decline have been greatly exaggerated. Despite a perceived fall in traditional/established religion, the evangelical church in the UK is growing, with research showing that vibrant forms of Christian expression are on the up in diverse areas across the country. ⁱⁱⁱ

INTRODUCTION: A NARRATIVE OF PRECIPITOUS DECLINE

According to many of the widely published and accepted figures, both church attendance and professing Christianity in Britain are in rapid decline. The map above shows the generally accepted picture of Christianity literally fading away from the British population.

Though the statistics of decline are undeniable, in this article I shall argue that much (though not all) of the decline is a decline in nominalism; evangelicalism has been remarkably resilient. Within the evangelical camp I shall outline some areas for real encouragement, without minimising the real challenges for the church in a rapidly secularising mission field or ignoring some of the undesirable causes of numerical growth that encourage little, if any, growth in health.

As the census data for England and Wales itself states, “Between 2001 and 2011, there has been a decrease in people who identify as Christian (from 71.7% to 59.3%) and an increase in those reporting no religion (from 14.8% to 25.1%). There were increases in the other main religious group categories, with the number of Muslims increasing the most (from 3% to 4.8%).”^{iv} North of the Scottish border there was a similar story, but with even fewer self-identifying as Christians: “In 2011 over half (54%) of the population of Scotland stated their religion as Christian—a decrease of 11 percentage points since 2001, whilst 37% of people stated that they had no religion—an increase of nine percentage points.”^v

One could make all kinds of claims to explain away the reality of the drop.^{vi} For example, the seriousness with which the nation took the question might be doubted. After all, following a successful internet campaign, over 370,000 self-identified as “Jedi.”^{vii} But however one spins it, there is no denying that 12.4% fewer in the nation decided for whatever reason to self-identify as Christian.

Church attendance likewise has been in rapid decline. We have statistics that go back much further than those of the census, and they all paint a picture of a much more persistent decline: “In 1851 between 40% and 60% of the British population attended church, with the figure around 30% in 1900, falling to 12% in 1979, 10% a decade later, and a figure of 7.5% in 1999.”^{viii}

It is easy to see why many believe the secularisation of Britain is almost complete, and that the church, as described by a former Archbishop of Canterbury, is “bleeding to death.”^{ix}

There has been a great deal of analysis as to what has led to such a decline. In a world of exciting and cheap broadcast entertainment, people are frankly not so bored at home that they’d rather be bored at church. With the arrival of interactive and social media, people’s feelings of connectedness may have increased. The options of what else one might do on a Sunday morning mean that even those who occasionally attend church might be more inclined to go shopping, an option not available until the Sunday Trading Act of 1994.^x

Social change has also led to the privatisation of religion. If the drop in those self-identifying as Christians in the 2011 Census may have been surprising, perhaps more surprising was that 72% of Brits self-identified as Christians in 2001 when only about one in ten of those professing Christians would be in church on any given Sunday.

In addition to this, the changing shape of religious education and worship in schools has led to growing ignorance of the gospel among the young. Whereas the law on the statute book still states that “In every school, there should be an act of collective worship in which each pupil can participate every day,”^{xi} the reality is that there is now little gospel content in most schools. Religious education has shifted from primarily studying the Christian Scriptures to a comparative religion that will look at the festivals and ethics of various religions, but little of their core beliefs, and even less actual reading of the biblical texts.

POSSIBLE COUNTER NARRATIVES

There have been several recent attempts to suggest more positive narratives. Firstly, of course, theologically speaking, the true church only ever grows. Jesus keeps on keeping his promise, “For I have come down from heaven not to do my will but to do the will of him who sent me. And this is the will of him who sent me, that I shall lose none of all those he has given me, but raise them up at the last day.”^{xii} But that is not to say that conversions will always outpace the rate at which the Lord calls his saints home.

Decline is declining

Some recent figures show that church decline is slowing: “While these increases are not sufficient to bring overall growth, these two key movements have, however, in effect, pushed the previous rate of decline back by about 5 years.”^{xiii} Others suggest that church attendance is once again on the increase, at least in London: “Church attendances, in freefall for so long, have started to rise again, particularly in Britain’s capital city. Numbers on the electoral rolls are increasing by well over 2% every year, while some churches have seen truly dramatic rises in numbers.”^{xiv}

Christianity has “gone dark”

Others see a residual Christianity that is much more privately held than publicly practised. Rather like Jack Bauer deep on a mission in 24, he might not have been in touch with CTU for a while, but everyone would be very foolish to think that he’s dead. The large-scale privatisation of religion should not be equated with its disappearance. Rather there is “a Christian memory which subsists in the general population, and is delegated to churchgoers and clerics for enactment until drawn upon ‘at crucial times in their individual or collected sense.’”^{xv}

Decline has always been partial and local

Others point to areas of real growth amongst a sea of decline. “Some churches in some regions are declining, but . . . substantial and sustained church growth has *also* taken place across Britain over the last 30 years.”^{xvi} Peter Brierley demonstrates that there are exactly the same number of denominations “with more than 10,000 members in 2008, which have decreased between 2008 and 2013 by, say, at least -15%” as those that have increased by at least +15%. This is not to deny that the declining denominations are generally both larger and older than the growing congregations.

But even here I’d be less optimistic about some of the areas of so-called growth. I cannot get particularly excited about much of the growth of black majority churches in London, where so many of them are entrenched in the prosperity gospel. So, Britain’s largest church,^{xvii} the Kingsway International Christian Centre, has grown from 300 people attending in 1992 to 12,000. I fear that such growth is doing little good for the souls of people both inside that church who believe the lies and outside of it who have the name of Christ associated with it.^{xviii}

Studies such as David Goodhew’s edited volume *Church Growth in Britain*^{xix} that seem to look for growth wherever they find it as an encouraging sign of continuing life seem to forget that life comes through the Word (e.g. John 5:24, 6:63, 6:68). So, in the chapter on the rise of black churches, those that teach the prosperity gospel and those that teach a simple faith are compared only in terms of their ability to attract adherents, not at all in terms of their faithfulness to the gospel.^{xx}

The decline of nominalism

It would be a vast over-simplification to say that nominal liberal Christianity is in decline but vibrant evangelical Christianity continues to grow, but it would certainly be the case that evangelical churches tend to decline less. The proportion of churchgoers who would call themselves evangelical has remained remarkably stable at around 2.5% of the population. In addition to this, of those denominations mentioned earlier that had seen 15% increase “apart from the Orthodox Churches and probably some of the Fresh Expressions churches, all are evangelical.”^{xxi} The two largest denominations experiencing such growth, New Frontiers and the Fellowship of Independent Evangelical Churches, are both explicitly Reformed in their theology. Those that had seen 15% decline were predominantly liberal or Catholic.

There are some things about the declining numbers of self-identifying Christians that I find encouraging. If over 72% of Brits understood themselves to be Christian, I fear for this country. I doubt that 72% of the population have ever even heard the Christian gospel, let alone entrusted their lives to Christ.

If people hear the gospel for the first time knowing that they are not Christians until they have repented and believed in Christ, I can only think that it is a good thing. I'd much rather see only those who trust Christ self-identifying as Christians, for nationalised false-assurance will be seen as far more perilous with the eyes of eternity than plummeting church membership.

A PERSONAL VIEW OF THE LAST 20 YEARS: WHY I'M CAUTIOUSLY ENCOURAGED

My own experience of church life in Britain spans the last four decades, only the last two of which have I paid much attention. My experience (other than school and college chapels) has largely been of Evangelicalism. I grew up attending an evangelical Anglican church that would have spanned both somewhat conservative and more charismatic forms of Evangelical Anglicanism, typified in turn by All Soul's Langham Place, and Holy Trinity Brompton. I became convinced both of credo-baptism and Reformed theology as an undergraduate. Since graduating I've been a member of six churches in Britain: two Anglican, two FIEC (the Fellowship of Independent Evangelical Churches), one Baptist Union, and one Grace Baptist. All have been within the conservative evangelical family, and so I shall focus on my view of conservative Evangelicalism with its encouragements and challenges.

I'm sure that similar stories could be shared from those in more charismatic circles such as the New Wine Network^{xxii} or New Frontiers International^{xxiii} or the rapidly growing networks of Black majority churches.^{xxiv}

My experience typifies the non-denominationalism of British evangelicals. Other than some Anglicans who would not dream of leaving the established church, most evangelicals would look for a church that 'felt' like the churches they'd previously appreciated, rather than belonging to the same fellowship or denomination.

Such fluidity is both exciting for the potential of new church plants to draw people from many different denominational backgrounds, and explains their ability to grow (at least through transfer growth). However, this fluidity may also account for some of the decline in more established churches.

Far more important for the future of the church is not which areas of the church will get a "bigger share of the cake" of Christians who still attend church, but from which areas will the real growth come—growth in conversions, growth in disciples.

There are several areas that I find very encouraging for the state of the church in Britain due to my observations over the last 20 years.

Training

While attendance at evangelical theological colleges and seminaries has remained somewhat static over the last 20 years, there have been huge advances in the available routes into ministry.

For example, in 1991 the Proclamation Trust began the "Cornhill Training Scheme" for men and women who wanted to learn to teach the Bible better. A one-year course, usually studied over two years half time to give more opportunity for service in the local church, it "equips men and women for expository Bible ministry in the local church,"^{xxv} whether in public preaching, teaching, women's or children's ministry.

About 50 men and women graduate from the course each year in London, and more recently Cornhill Scotland and Belfast have added to that number. The calibre of Bible-handling skills that the course gives people in just one year's study is, in my opinion, quite extraordinary. Twenty-three years on, and there are several hundred workers across the nation and world who are better equipped to correctly handle the word of truth.

In addition to this course, other churches run their own training and associate programmes, similarly trying to equip trainees within the local church to handle God's word well.^{xxvi}

The Anglicans had been way ahead of Non-Conformists^{xxvii} in resourcing and encouraging men into pastoral ministry. This was partly due to the financial resources available through the Church of England to send men to theological college, and partly due to a very subjective view of the internal call among many free churches. It has been very encouraging to see far more help and encouragement toward pastoral ministry within the free churches, from ministries that help people take the first steps of considering ministry as a possibility^{xxviii} through formal training and more Assistant Pastorates.^{xxix} The help that many are receiving is forming a virtuous circle: those who have received help tend to give it, and it is my impression that there are many more pastors than there were 20 years ago who see it as part of their role to raise up the next generation of pastors in a 2 Timothy 2:2-shaped ministry.

As an example of how independent churches are catching up with their Anglican brothers, when I went to Oak Hill College in 1999, I was one of three men training for pastoral ministry outside of the CofE. Now the College would take similar numbers of Anglicans and Independents, and provide equally suitable education for them both.^{xxx}

Gospel Partnerships

There have been several organisations that work across denominations for the health of the church nationwide. Let me highlight just three.

The Proclamation Trust.

The Proclamation Trust grew out of the ministry of Dick Lucas, the rector of St. Helens Bishopsgate for nearly 40 years. It “serves the local church by promoting the work of biblical expository preaching in the UK and further afield.”^{xxxi} As such, it is like a “one mark of a healthy church”—promoting ministry. It would be hard to overestimate the impact that the Proc Trust has had. By teaching and equipping pastors to trust that the transformation of God's people comes from the proclamation of God's word, it unleashes the formal principle of the Reformation upon God's churches. It works toward its end through publishing resources, holding conferences—most notably the annual Evangelical Ministry Assembly (EMA)—and running the Corhill Training Course mentioned above. Its impact continues to grow, exemplified from the move of the EMA from St. Helen's to the Barbican in 2013 as it had turned people away through being fully booked for the previous two years. In the past 5 years 2,500 different people have attended, with about 250 first timers each year. That is a significant number for the UK church.

Gospel partnerships.

The gospel partnerships are a “network of Bible believing partnerships and churches throughout the UK seeking to reach the country with the life-changing news of Jesus. They exist to aid those churches and partnerships with resources on a wide range of topics.”^{xxxii}

These networks have been useful to help local churches partner together in evangelism, from the nationwide “A Passion for Life”^{xxxiii} missions in 2010 and 2014, to local partnership such as the lunchtime talks for workers in different areas of London.^{xxxiv}

Church planting initiatives.

With many areas of the UK without Bible-believing churches with expository ministries, it is hugely encouraging to see several church planting initiatives across the country.

2020 Birmingham^{xxxv} aims to “assist in the planting of 20 new congregations by the year 2020” within Britain's second largest city. 20 schemes^{xxxvi} has a similar goal in Scotland's most impoverished neighbourhoods, as does the Antioch Plan^{xxxvii} in London. Other nationwide church planting initiatives and movements include Acts 29 Europe and New Frontiers International.

Whether true Christianity is declining in Britain is still up for debate: biblical literacy is certainly in decline, and so church planting initiatives that reach those with no church background are enormously welcome.

AREA OF CONTINUING CONCERN

Within a rapidly changing mission field, the pressure for innovation is very strong. If we are to reach an adapting culture, we must adapt in our communication, particularly our ability to communicate the Bible to people who are utterly biblically illiterate, yet the majority of whom still self-identify as Christians. However, even among conservative evangelicals who love expository preaching, it would be seen as a truism that we can flex on everything except the gospel.

This has given rise to a desire to have new ways of doing church, whether “Fresh Expressions” or merely church plants. What often happens with both of these is younger people moving from established churches to new churches.

I fear that this is impoverishing both the new churches and the old. It is easy to see how the old churches are being impoverished. They have few young people and therefore possibly no future. Elderly saints struggle to care for one another, and may spend all the energy they have in keeping the church going, having little energy left for evangelism.

But the young church plants are also being impoverished, and not just by failing to make the most of the resources of church buildings. They are being impoverished in their discipleship by having few elderly people in their congregations to love, learn from, and be loved by. Discipleship is less intergenerational than it should be, and that is impoverishing everyone.

It’s not just in age that churches are becoming more monochrome. In a desire to reach the unchurched this year, I heard of one church entirely for skateboarders, and another right next to an area of urban deprivation that describes itself as being a church for “young professionals.”

However, there are a growing number of people interested in church revitalisation as well as planting churches for young people. All three of the church planting organisations I mentioned earlier want to be involved in both strategies.

CONCLUSION: THE CHURCH IN THE NEXT 20 YEARS

I am neither the prophet nor the son of a prophet, so I hesitate to make detailed predictions about the future of the Lord’s church in Britain.

As nominalism continues to decline, those who don’t know Christ as Lord will have few reasons to claim his name. I fear that there will be fewer concessions made to an apparently shrinking minority of the population whose consciences are bound to Christ and his Word. It will be difficult. But we follow a crucified Messiah, and we should expect difficulty. “If the world hates you, keep in mind that it hated me first,” he said, hours before the world showed him the full extent of its hatred even as he was showing the full extent of his love.

I thank the Lord that at a time when persecution may well come, there has been a growing confidence that the Word of God equips the people of God to do the work of God. There is a small army of young ministers competent to handle that Word, and while that Word is being preached and lived, I trust the Lord will have many people in this land that he will bring to life by that Word. I’m looking forward to seeing what he will do, and I doubt very much that it would be the death of Christianity in Britain.

ii By Britain, I here refer to the island of Great Britain comprised of England, Scotland and Wales, not the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland. Northern Ireland would require its own study and though there would be many similarities, it would not quite fit the mould of the rest of the UK.

iii Dr David Landram, quoted <http://www.eauk.org/church/stories/death-of-the-uk-church-greatly-exaggerated.cfm>

iv <http://www.ons.gov.uk/ons/rel/census/2011-census/key-statistics-for-local-authorities-in-england-and-wales/rpt-religion.html>

v <http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Topics/People/Equality/Equalities/DataGrid/Religion/RelPopMig>

vi For a survey of arguments not to take the data serious see Peter Brierley, “Nominal Christians” <http://brierleyconsultancy.com/images/nominalism.pdf>

vii <http://www.ons.gov.uk/ons/rel/census/census-2001-summary-theme-figures-and-rankings/390-000-jedis-there-are/jedi.html>

viii Garnett, Grimley, Harris, Whyte & Williams Ed, “Redefining Christian Britain: Post 1945 Perspectives” (London: SCM, 2007) 3

ix Ibid, 1

x <http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukxi/1994/1841/made> Accessed October 2014

xi <https://www.churchofengland.org/media/1244326/qs%20and%20as%20re%20collective%20worship.pdf>

xii John 6:38-39 (NIV)

xiii Peter Brierley, *UK Christian Statistic 2: 2010-2020* <http://brierleyconsultancy.com/images/intro.pdf> p.2

xiv Peter Osborne, *The Return to Religion* <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/religion/8970031/The-return-to-religion.html>

xv Ibid, 6, quoting Grace Davie, *Europe, the exceptional Case: Parameters of faith in the modern world* (London: D,L&T) 19

xvi David Goodhew Ed. *Church Growth in Britain: 1980 to the present* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2012) p3.

xvii <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2008/feb/14/religion.architecture>

xviii <http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p01b0n3z>

xix David Goodhew Ed. *Church Growth in Britain: 1980 to the present* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2012)

xx Ibid, 109-113

xxi <http://www.brierleyconsultancy.com/images/csintro.pdf> 4

xxii <http://www.new-wine.org/>

xxiii <http://www.newfrontiers.co.uk/>

xxiv <http://www.christiantoday.com/article/huge.growth.of.black.majority.churches.in.london/33012.htm>

xxv <http://www.proctrust.org.uk/cornhill/>

xxvi Notably St Helen’s Bishopsgate and the Co-Mission network of Churches.

xxvii i.e. those not within the established church, the Church of England

xxviii E.g. the Hub Conference <http://www.fiec.org.uk/what-we-do/article/the-hub> and 9:38<http://www.ninethirtyeight.org/>

xxix E.g. <http://www.fiec.org.uk/what-we-do/article/partners-in-training>

xxx This has been exemplified by the appointment of Graham Beynon as Director of Independent Ministry Training http://www.oakhill.ac.uk/people/beynon_pickles.html

xxxi <http://www.proctrust.org.uk/>

xxxii <http://thegospelpartnerships.org.uk/about-us/about-us>

xxxiii <http://apassionforlife.org.uk/en>

xxxiv <http://www.gospelatwork.org.uk/>

xxxv <http://www.2020birmingham.org/>

xxxvi <http://20schemes.com/about/mission/>

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First Five Years

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By Thomas Kidd

Colonial America and How (Not) to Pray Against Cultural Decline

There is an overwhelming sense among Christians in the West that we are not only in a time of cultural decline, but that it is gaining pace. If that's true, [how should Christians pray?](#)

There may in fact be a lesson to learn about praying from our colonial forbears: perhaps God cares less about our efforts at moral reform than he cares about hearts that belong to him.

CULTURAL DECLENSION IN EARLY NEW ENGLAND

The New England Puritans were masters of the “declension narrative,” or the idea that things were getting worse all the time. The Puritans created—or refashioned—a kind of sermon, the “[jeremiad](#),” to bewail the people’s roster of sins. They warned of God’s impending judgment, in the mode of the Old Testament prophets. By the late 1600s (Massachusetts was founded in 1630), the recitation of the people’s failings, and the ways they had fallen from their first love, became staples of Puritan preaching.

The original Puritan settlers had come with a unified vision of a society and church built around godly, biblical principles. They hoped that they could escape the corruption and violence of England and carve out a Bible commonwealth in New England’s forests. But as the decades passed, some of New England’s children grew less interested in the first founders’ commitments. In the 1660s, so many New Englanders no longer qualified for full church membership that pastors had to create a “halfway” covenant, in which unregenerate parents could still have their children baptized.

As the century wore on, there were signs of declension everywhere. People seemed more attracted to business and entertainment than piety (this problem started early in American history!). Liberal (or at least anti-Calvinist) theology was charming teachers at Harvard College, the training school for Puritan pastors. King Philip’s War in the 1670s proved to be one of the most devastating in colonial American history. Beginning in the 1690s, New Englanders fought a series of brutal wars with the French in Canada, and with France’s Native American allies. Then in 1692 came the tragic Salem witchcraft episode, which was a shameful legal embarrassment as well as another sign to many that Satan was up to his devouring ways in Massachusetts.

PRAYERS FOR MORAL REFORM

Decline initially led pastors to call for reform. Michael Wigglesworth's poem "God's Controversy with New England" (1662) perfectly illustrated the Puritans' sense of impending judgment and the need for repentance. He warned New Englanders (speaking from God's perspective) that

Your sins me press as sheaves do load a cart,
And therefore I will plague you for this gear
Except you seriously, and soon repent,
I'll not delay your pain and heavy punishment.

But calls for repentance and moral reform did not seem to do much good. Perhaps these admonitions were too focused on what the Puritans themselves could do about the decline.

PRAYER FOR GOD'S REDEMPTIVE POWER

By the 1670s, a cadre of new Puritan ministers—perhaps America's first "evangelical" pastors—made a subtle but critical shift. For these pastors, the emphasis was no longer so much on reform, but on revival; not on people's moral effort, but on God's redemptive power.

Samuel Torrey, minister of Weymouth, Massachusetts, began to point New Englanders beyond efforts to reform themselves, and toward the work of the Holy Spirit in fostering conversion, which would necessarily produce lives of holiness. Shortly after King Philip's War, Torrey told people that in light of the devastating conflict, it was clear that "all ordinary means" of moral reform had not worked. "It is high time," Torrey insisted, for all people, "by faith in prayer, to seek the Lord until he come and rain righteousness upon us." To the extent that believers had a proactive role to play in bringing about a great work of God, it was in submissive prayer, acknowledging that they could not reform or save themselves, or their society.

THE BEGINNINGS OF A HARVEST

This theology of God-centered revival crystallized in the family of Jonathan Edwards.

First came Edwards' grandfather and pastoral predecessor at Northampton, Massachusetts, Solomon Stoddard. Stoddard was one of the first ministers to lead congregation-level revivals, or "harvests," in his church prior to the First Great Awakening. He reminded others that such harvests, when great numbers of people would experience conversions around the same time, came only by the power of the Holy Spirit. "The Spirit of the Lord must be poured out upon the people, else religion will not revive," Stoddard preached.

Timothy Edwards, Jonathan's father, likewise saw four or five significant church-based revivals prior to the Great Awakening, some of which profoundly influenced Jonathan Edwards himself.

Evidence would suggest that in the 1720s and 1730s, many pastors and laypeople took up the call to pray for an outpouring of the Holy Spirit. Declension, to them, was not inevitable. Only God, however, could reverse it.

Finally, in 1734-1735 came Edwards' Northampton awakening. "All seemed to be seized with a deep concern about their eternal salvation," Edwards wrote. Edwards' account of the revival, [A Faithful Narrative of the Surprising Work of God](#), found an audience in England as well as America, offering a hint that something much larger than a local church harvest was beginning to emerge.

THE NEW BIRTH AND THE WORK OF GOD

Then from England came word of the spectacular successes of a young Calvinist Anglican preacher, George Whitefield. Whitefield knew about the Northampton revival long before he met Edwards personally, and his gifted preaching and focus on the “new birth” of salvation drew audiences in the tens of thousands in London. Then in 1739, Whitefield arrived for his first American tour. Untold thousands in Britain and America would convert under his preaching, in which he insisted that salvation was all a work of God, not of man.

The most fruitful season of Whitefield’s American tour came in New England in the fall of 1740. There, in October, he fulfilled a longtime wish when he met Edwards and preached at the Northampton meetinghouse. He came at Edwards’ invitation, who hoped that the evangelist might “revive the flame again, even in the darkest times.” Edwards thought that the new revivals in Britain and America might signal “the dawning of a day of God’s might power and glorious grace.”

Edwards noted that the congregation was “extraordinarily melted” during Whitefield’s preaching, and almost everyone there wept. Among those deeply moved was Edwards himself. “Dear Mr. Edwards wept during the whole time of exercise,” Whitefield noted. It was a remarkable meeting of the two greatest leaders of the Great Awakening, and a focal point of a massive revival for which many had been praying for years.

FROM MAN-CENTERED REFORM TO GOD-CENTERED REVIVAL

The shift from man-centered reform to God-centered revival had broken the old Puritan cycle of declension and despair. Whitefield, Edwards, and legions of new evangelical pastors concluded that the Holy Spirit could turn the hearts of the Anglo-American people back to God, however bleak the era might look from a human perspective.

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By John Piper

Contemporary America and A Call to Prayer

In the light of [this history of George Whitefield and Jonathan Edwards](#) and the Scriptures, I would like to call us to new passion in prayer.

Let prayer rise among all our priorities, and permeate all our activities, to the degree that our goals are impossible for humans to achieve. What would that include?

All *conversions to Christ* are impossible for humans to achieve. Jesus said so, when the rich young ruler turned away: “With man this is impossible, but with God all things are possible” (Mat. 19:26).

All *holy living* is impossible for humans to achieve. This is because holy living is by definition “walking by the Spirit” (Gal. 5:16), and “putting to death the deeds of the body by the Spirit” (Rom. 8:13). If the Spirit does not come in power, we cannot live holy lives.

Or another way to say it is that *faith* is impossible for humans to produce without God’s life-giving power (Eph. 2:8); and whatever is not from faith is sin (Rom. 14:23); and without faith it is impossible to please God (Heb. 11:6). Therefore, all God-pleasing, non-sinful life is impossible for mere humans.

God has appointed faith-driven prayer as the normal way for us to receive what we cannot achieve. “You do not have, because you do not ask” (James 4:2). “Call upon me in the day of trouble; I will deliver you, and you shall glorify me” (Psalms 50:15).

God’s judgments are already falling heavily on America. “Since they did not see fit to acknowledge God, God gave them up to a debased mind to do what ought not to be done” (Rom. 1:28). Without a deep and pervasive awakening of Christ-exalting faith and holiness, this judgment will climax in a cataclysm of physical and cultural destruction.

There is reason to believe that God’s judgment begins with his house. “It is time for judgment to begin at the household of God; and if it begins with us, what will be the outcome for those who do not obey the gospel of God?” (1 Peter 4:17). The call for cultural awakening includes the call for *Christian* reformation and revival.

This awakening and reformation and revival is impossible for humans to bring about. Only God can turn the hearts of millions of people from the love of sin to the love of Christ.

Therefore, I appeal to all Christians: Let us move to a new level in our commitment to pray for the outpouring of God's saving and sanctifying power in our day.

- Set aside new time alone with God to ask him for omnipotent intervention in the awakening of Christ-exalting faith and holiness.
- Find a few like-minded friends and arrange to meet weekly for 30 minutes or one hour, where you do not discuss anything or share prayer requests, but only pray. Someone reads a passage of Scripture and the other 28 (or 58) minutes are dedicated to prayer. Then get up and go back to your work.
- Build a season of prayer into every church gathering. Not an opening prayer only, but a "season" of prayer. That is what the first half of our worship services is as we sing our prayers. I am saying let *all* other gatherings be soaked with a season that says: What matters most here cannot happen without divine intervention.
- Let every speaker at every Christian conference be prayed over by the conference leaders for at least 15 minutes. Don't send a man or woman to speak to hundreds and thousands of people without pleading over them that they would be empowered by God that miracles would happen, because the miracle of conversion and holiness is what we live for.
- Let pastors' gatherings be transformed, so that there is enough prayer that all feel: We acted as if what we really want could not happen without the intervention of the prayer-hearing God.
- Let every pastor ask the Lord: Is it time for me to take unusual leadership to summon my people, and the networks I am part of, to extraordinary prayer?

When Jesus looked out on the crowds who "were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd" (Mat. 9:36), he called his disciples to pray. With Edwards and Whitefield, I am echoing that call.

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By Matt McCullough

The American Jeremiad: A Bit of Perspective on the Rhetoric of Decline

You don't need me to tell you that things are not what they once were for Christians in America. Much has changed in the last two decades, let alone the last two centuries. And some of this change hasn't been good—not for America, not for American Christianity.

But there is a way of responding to declension—real or imagined—that only compounds the problem. We must guard against any response to decline that appeals to a past that never existed or to a future that God hasn't promised us.

In this little article, I merely wish to sketch a cautionary tale. Narratives of decline, especially in our American context, build on an approach to history with a long history of its own.

INTRODUCING THE AMERICAN JEREMIAD

I want to introduce you to the American jeremiad. That's the term scholars have given to what one has called "a mainstream and deeply American way of thinking about the nation's past, present, and future."¹ The term comes from the prophet Jeremiah, who catalogued Israel's fall from fidelity and warned of the horrible judgments to come.

The jeremiad is a rhetorical tradition—a literary genre, even—that has appeared in every phase of America's history—from King Philip's War to Hurricane Katrina.² But the place to begin is Puritan New England. That's where the jeremiad got its American stamp, where it was most commonly applied and most fully developed.

Most Puritan jeremiads were preached not during regular corporate worship but on special occasions appointed by the government. There were sermons delivered on election days. There were artillery sermons on days set for review of the colonial militia. There were thanksgiving sermons on days celebrating great blessings. But the jeremiad was most at home on days of colony-wide fasting in response to some crisis.

We think of Puritan New England as a society where Christian ethics and civil government were thoroughly intertwined. It's tough to imagine a society where religion had greater influence. But to her Puritan pastors, just a generation or two removed from the founding, New England was a world of decay and fearful decline.

Theirs was also a world of wonders, a world in which events we consider mundane had discernible providential significance. There were of course the large-scale stressors of war and violence, especially their conflicts with Native Americans. But preachers also traced the hand of God in shifting weather patterns, in the failure of local crops, in the appearance of a comet in the sky, or in the occasional “monstrous birth”—their term for a child born with obvious deformity.³

Behind concern for this or that circumstantial event lay a deeper angst: what if no one outside our colony cares any longer for what we’re trying to accomplish? John Winthrop at their founding had described their society as a city on a hill on which the eyes of the world would be riveted. By the second generation they had good reason to wonder whether anyone was still looking.⁴

It was in their jeremiads that Puritan pastors interpreted such calamities and tied them to the moral problems in their society. Scholars speak of the jeremiad as a rhetorical tradition—as an identifiable genre—because these sermons followed a really predictable formula.

In his *Prodigal Nation*, which begins in New England and traces the jeremiad’s role in America into the 21st century, Andrew Murphy identifies three basic steps in these sermons.⁵

First, jeremiads lamented the harsh realities of the present. They took up the crisis du jour and tried to explain it in light of the sins of the people. They pointed to Sabbath-breaking and apostasy, to sensuality and profanity, to worldliness and luxury and a host of other problems.

These moral failures appeared all the more clearly in light of the second theme in the jeremiad: a contrast to the ideal purity of the founding generation. “Rather than an abstract critique,” Murphy writes, “jeremiads claimed that piety and godly order had once existed and had subsequently been lost.”⁶ New England had been smaller in those early years. Its population consisted mostly of those who chose for themselves to take part in this “errand into the wilderness.” They were zealous and bought-in. Then the next generations brought a population boom, a surge in material prosperity, and, so their preachers believed, a society more fixated on the profits of the market than the profits of godliness.

But the jeremiads did not end in despair. The third element was a call for repentance and renewal, backed by a promise that God would not forsake them if they returned to him.

Here’s how one pastor, Samuel Torrey, put it in 1683: “May we not with fear and trembling apprehend our selves: even this whole People, New England, as it were standing before God, upon our great Trial for Life and Death [?] . . . If you do thus chuse [sic] Life, all will be well with New-England [sic], but if you should refuse, you will likely, not only destroy your selves; but all.”⁷

What Murphy and others have noticed about the American jeremiad, especially in its Puritan form, is that there’s a tension at its heart—a tension between despair and hope. Despair over how far society has fallen. Hope for how God would honor renewed obedience. And underneath the despair and the hope is the confidence that God has established a cause and effect relationship between Christian faithfulness and social flourishing.

LEARNING FROM THE AMERICAN JEREMIAD

You may be wondering whether there’s any more than antiquarian value to looking into the Puritan jeremiad. I think there is. Understanding how others perceived decline and renewal can help us to greater self-awareness as we sift through accounts of the shifting place of religion in our society. I believe these jeremiads were at once too pessimistic and too optimistic, and that they rested on assumptions about the purposes of God that were more distracting than helpful.

To confront our own narratives of decline in light of the jeremiad tradition, we've got to check our facts and check our assumptions.

Do the facts match historical reality? The problem with jeremiads is that they often compared the best parts of a former generation with the worst parts of their own. Neither the past nor the present got a fair treatment. I'm not saying nothing ever changes. Sometimes some things do get worse. But every culture is a mixed bag because the basic building blocks in every culture are human beings marked by both dignity and depravity. Sure, things change, but when some things get worse usually some other things get better.

When third generation Puritans hankered after the days of their grandfathers, they were talking about a society marked by thriving churches, widespread attention to biblical preaching, and a code of law deeply influenced by biblical ethics. It was also the society that gave us the Salem Witch Trials. It was a society in which Native Americans were displaced, Quakers were executed, Baptists were whipped or banished, and voting was restricted to adult male propertied church members.

The golden age doesn't exist. And when we start measuring decline, we've got to get really clear on our point of departure. We ought to be suspicious of the ideal. Was it ever realized? Is it even important?

Do the assumptions match biblical priorities? Columbia lit professor Sacvan Bercovitch wrote the classic treatment of the American jeremiad back in the 1970s. The central theme in his account is what he called the "stubborn optimism" behind all the gloom and doom in the rhetoric of New England's clergy. Underneath the melodramatic anxiety that drove these sermons' call to reform was an unshakeable confidence in the distinctive favor of God on their society.

Two assumptions were especially important. First, the jeremiad assumed a special covenant relationship that made their society different from others around them. God, New England ministers believed, looked upon them as he had looked upon Israel. The threat of divine punishment for moral decline was merely the dark underbelly of his distinguishing, fatherly love.

The second assumption is closely related. The jeremiad assumed a cause and effect relationship between faithfulness and social flourishing or, on the other hand, unfaithfulness and social decline. The assumption of blessings and curses was part and parcel to the idea of a national covenant.

I'm convinced the jeremiad's power rested on promises God never made—not to New England, not to America, not to any other nation. This is hardly the place for a worthy critique of the idea of a national covenant. But I'll merely offer one last observation on this front.

Rhetoric of decline is almost always rhetoric of persuasion. It aims to diagnose a problem and prescribe a solution. We must be careful to assure the prescriptions and their expected results don't go beyond what God has actually promised.

Reigning cultural values on matters of sexuality and marriage are shifting with breathtaking, unprecedented speed. The implications for religious liberty are unprecedented too. We are responsible as pastors to help our people navigate new and still shifting realities in a way that is faithful. But we must be careful how we frame our call to faithfulness. There is no idyllic future—no return to widespread cultural influence—hinging on what we do next. It may be that we are more and more faithful even as our voices grow more and more marginal.

God has promised that nothing will prevail against his church. He has promised that nothing will hinder the coming of his kingdom. He has called his people to wait for him, to bear witness to him, and to seek the good of their neighbors in his name. He has called us to pray for those in authority over us and to use whatever influence we have to pursue justice in love.

But he has not given us a motive for our faithfulness more specific than the display of his glory in our time and place. That must be enough for us, come what may.

[1 Andrew Murphy](#), *Prodigal Nation: Moral Decline and Divine Punishment from New England to 9/11* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 5.

[2 For a standard account of the jeremiad](#), see Sacvan Bercovitch, *The American Jeremiad* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1978). Bercovitch traces the development of the jeremiad through the American Civil War. Andrew Murphy's more recent study *Prodigal Nation* (cited above) builds on Bercovitch and others, following the rhetoric of decline into the 21st century.

[3 For these and other examples](#), see Harry Stout, *The New England Soul: Preaching and Religious Culture in Colonial New England* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), 74-76; David Hall, *World of Wonders, Days of Judgment: Popular Religious Belief in Early New England* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989), 71-116.

[4 This angst](#) over whether anyone cared about the New England experiment is a central theme in the work of Perry Miller, the Harvard scholar who first popularized the term "jeremiad" and reintroduced the Puritans as worthy historical subjects. See, for example, his classic essay "Errand into the Wilderness," in *Errand into the Wilderness* (1956; repr., Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1984), 1-15.

[5 Murphy](#), *Prodigal Nation*, 7-10, 24-34.

[6 Ibid.](#), 29.

[7 Quoted in Bercovitch](#), *American Jeremiad*, 55.

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By Owen Strachan

The Wilberforce Test: Preaching and the Public Square

William Wilberforce was born with life laid out like a Persian carpet before him. He was from fantastic wealth, had access to high society whenever he pleased, and had the social graces to charm most anyone he encountered.

Wilberforce was raised by an evangelical aunt but had drifted from a close connection to Christianity. When as a 26-year-old man he found himself empty and unfulfilled by his worldly trajectory, he secretly contacted famous pastor John Newton for counsel. Through Newton's influence, Wilberforce soon embraced the religion of the "enthusiasts" of England, a derogatory term for Christians who zealously preached the new birth.

Wilberforce became the champion *par excellence* of abolition in Great Britain. He lived to see the defeat of slavery and the slave trade in his homeland and its imperial territories. The striking thing about Wilberforce's story is this: he did not work alone. His pastor, John Venn, the Rector of Clapham, is basically forgotten. Yet week after week, Venn fired the conscience and stirred the heart of Wilberforce and his activist peers. The public work of Wilberforce—world-changing work, that is—was shaped by the pulpit ministry of Venn.¹

In considering this example, I would like to pose a question: could our preaching today raise up a Wilberforce? Could it pass, in other words, what we could call the Wilberforce test? In what follows, I will sketch out how it is that a pastor can meet this mark. Every pastor, I argue, is a public theologian, called by God to bring biblical truth to bear on all of life such that his people storm the gates of hell and promote righteousness and mercy in a fallen world.

THE CORE OF A PASTOR'S LABORS: EXPOSITORY PREACHING

Too often, we are presented with just two choices when it comes to the pulpit and public-square witness. Either the pastor is a political activist, or he is effectively removed from cultural concerns. Both of these models have serious problems.

The central conviction of the pastor is the truthfulness of the gospel. This gospel announces that Jesus Christ, the Son of God, was crucified for our justification and raised to life for our vindication. This message is the foundation of every minister's work, which means that every minister stewards a theological reality. Every pastor, in other words, is a

theologian. R. Albert Mohler, Jr. has noted that “The pastoral calling is inherently theological. Given the fact that the pastor is to be the teacher of the Word of God and the teacher of the gospel, it cannot be otherwise.” Mohler sharpens the point: “The idea of the pastorate as a non-theological office is inconceivable in light of the New Testament.”²

This is a very different conception of the pastor than we often hear today. The pastor in the historic model is not a coach, executive, administrator, cheerleader, or entrepreneur. Fundamentally, the pastor is the steward of the most precious message there is. But the pastor does not only loft this message into the air. He preaches it to all who will hear and watches as the Word and the gospel build a church. This church is not incidental to the gospel. As Mark Dever has said, “Christian proclamation might make the gospel audible, but Christians living together in local congregations make the gospel visible (see John 13:34-35). The church is the gospel made visible.”³ To a degree that we rarely acknowledge, the church is a living picture of the gospel.

This means that the pastor is a theologian, but a theologian attached to a people. The pastor serves as theologian to his people not primarily by writing dense articles in the church newsletter, but by preaching the truth and shepherding the flock. This is, as noted, expressly theological work. Mohler has said it like this: “There is no more theological calling than this—guard the flock of God for the sake of God’s truth.”⁴ Pastoral ministry is not a retreat from theological work, an escape to the doctrinal hinterlands of what is sometimes called “practical ministry.” Pastoral ministry occurs on the front lines of the great theological conflict between God and the devil. Every pastor a theologian, then; every pastor a warrior-priest, standing shoulder-to-shoulder with Melchizedek, following the one who is greater than he.

Pastors are not politicians. They are appointed by God, however, to shape the worldview and thus the convictions of their people. Faithful handling of the Word of God means preaching the whole counsel of God. Preaching the whole counsel of God, in turn, cannot help but form and enliven Christian conviction, the principles that a believer must advocate in a fallen world, for the world lacks them even as it desperately needs them. Christian conviction is not made only for business meetings and quiet times. It is forged in the furnace of biblical exposition. Christian conviction looks like fire. It smells like smoke. It feels like a burning ember plucked from the flame. It emerges from the furnace of Scripture, and it is fashioned to sear and to awaken.

THE PASTOR PREACHING IN PUBLIC

Too often, preaching is described in much quieter terms than this. The grandeur and daring of biblical exposition is damped down. The private, solitary nature of the homiletical event is emphasized—each person quietly considering the claims of Christ. Preaching, to be sure, is aimed at the human heart. In biblical proclamation, God does business with the sinner. Though a pastor expositions the Word to dozens or hundreds or thousands of people, he understands that through his exposition, God meets with each individual person.

Let us hold fast to this “private” dimension of preaching. But perhaps we should ponder the recovery of the public dimension of preaching. As we have made clear, preaching is centered in the gospel of the Word. The gospel is a public announcement of a public event. Jesus was not crucified in private. He was spread out on a Roman cross, humiliated before all who would cast an eye upward at his foaming mouth and his heaving chest. His death was orchestrated and approved by the Roman political hierarchy. But the public nature of his horrific death goes far beyond Christ’s humiliation. His death, unlike every other death, was not only a cessation of life, but an act of atonement. No other person has atoned for sin in their passing. Only Jesus.

In paying for the sins of his people at Golgotha, Jesus accomplished a public work with profoundly private dimensions. All who will ever be found in him had their “record of debt cancelled” at the cross, according to Colossians 2:14. This cancellation was a “public spectacle” (2:15). It was the enactment of triumph over “the powers and authorities” of Satan’s kingdom. The cross that paid for private—or individual—sin was public, in other words. It was a display of divine force. It was a celebration of theistic power. It was an act of public shaming. Though Rome and her soldiers looked at

Christ's cross with disdain, God and his angels knew the truth. The power of Satan was broken. The head of Satan was crushed. Though hidden from the world, the defeat of darkness and death was accomplished.

Every time a pastor preaches the cross, they preach publicly. By this I do not only mean that they deliver a sermon in a forum to which the broader community is invited. I mean that from Bangladesh to Bangor, Maine to Bristol, England they announce to the cosmos that Jesus has won and Satan has lost. The church in which a pastor preaches is local. But the "theater," to use Calvin's language, is universal.⁵ Every Sunday, across the world, 100,000 pastors announce together that the Messiah-King has come, and has triumphed. Satan must hear this every week, and must gnash his teeth every time he is reminded of his certain destruction.

There is another dimension of this public ministry to consider as well. The pastor's message is not only addressed to the broader world, but is applicable to it. The Word and the gospel lay claim to all they encounter, advancing the kingdom of Christ over all the earth. The kingdom is dynamic. It does not shrink back. It is not overcome. It is undefeated, even as Jesus is undefeated, and his gospel is undefeated. The kingdom is inherently spiritual. It is the reign and rule of God. But though spiritual, the application of Christ's Messiahship to this realm has powerfully public effect. By the preaching of the Word of Christ, human hearts are claimed, human behavior changes, churches are birthed, and Christians live out their faith in their community and culture. When all this happens, the gospel is working in the private sphere to influence the public sphere. The city of God, to quote Augustine, is ministering grace to the city of man.

The church, in other words, is the true culture. The community of God is created by the very mind of God. It is no mere organization. It is a living-and-breathing body, the spiritual entity that displays the glory of God and advances the kingdom of God. This means, as William Willimon has said, that the church is not only a change-agent in the world, but "is a world." The church dares to "claim that this world, this culture—the church—is God's way with the world, the appointed means by which Christ is bringing all things unto himself."⁶ To join the local church is not only to mark oneself as a believer as part of a larger body. It is to enter a new world, the true world.

So it is that preaching is public, for in preaching, the doorway to this other world, the true world, opens.

PASTORS AS PUBLIC THEOLOGIAN IN A FRAGMENTED WORLD: THREE CONSIDERATIONS FOR TODAY

Thus far we have sketched out what it means to be a pastor. I have argued that every pastor is a theologian, stewarding and announcing expressly theological realities. All the work of the pastor—discipling, counseling, evangelizing, leading, and everything else—proceeds from theistic truths. If God is not Triune, if the Word is not inerrant, if Jesus is not the only Savior, then pastoring is just community service with a spritz of spirituality. But it is not. Pastoring is essentially and inescapably theological work.

It is not only this: it is public. The pastor has the privilege of declaring that another world exists, and that this world is not far-off, but has broken into our own world. The kingdom of Christ is advancing with relentless pace, and though it suffers violence, no one can stop it (Matthew 11:12). Thus far we have a general understanding of the pastor as public theologian. In what follows, let us look briefly at three specific ways that pastors can function as public theologians for the good of their church and their world.

1) Pastors can publicly speak the truth in love on all kinds of ethical matters.

John the Baptist is a major forerunner in this regard. Consider the account of his death in Matthew 14:

At that time Herod the tetrarch heard about the fame of Jesus, and he said to his servants, "This is John the Baptist. He has been raised from the dead; that is why these miraculous powers are at work in him." For Herod

had seized John and bound him and put him in prison for the sake of Herodias, his brother Philip's wife, because John had been saying to him, "It is not lawful for you to have her." (Matthew 14:1-4 ESV)

John sets a bold example for us in calling public sin to account. This example of ethical courage is for pastors and leaders of God's church. We minister in continuity with John the Baptist. He is the original herald of Jesus Christ. He had no pulpit to call his own, but his work was the pastor's work in its essence. John preached the truth. The truth is no respecter of feelings. The truth is no respecter of monarchs. The truth is no respecter of public/private divides. As Shakespeare said, the truth will out. If we were to put it more biblically, the truth *must* out.

We do not have the option, then, of quieting our theological witness on certain matters. Where wrong is being committed, the truth compels us to confront it. Where sin is being practiced, the truth inspires us to denounce it. Where evil is flourishing, the truth moves us to oppose it. This holds whether we are counseling a young believer with bad Internet surfing habits, discipling a world-making politician caught in a sinful relationship, or preaching to a church body perplexed by transgender identity. The truth is theological in nature, but it does not stop there. When it makes contact with the world, it creates an ethical witness. Pastors have no choice but to fill this role.

The gospel of Jesus Christ has fitted every pastor to call out sin and to promote goodness. This is not necessarily a complex calling. Ethical issues surely take on complexity, but at base, the ministry of John the Baptist that ends his life is a simple one. Pastors need not have written a dissertation on Reinhold Niebuhr's applied theology of depravity to be fitted for public witness on matters of sin and righteousness. They need to know Scripture. They need to have a biblically informed conscience. Then, they need to search their world and see where Herod still reigns, and where he must be opposed and called to repentance.

2) Pastors can train their people to be salt and light.

No text more speaks to this sense of identity than the call to be salt and light of the Sermon on the Mount.

You are the salt of the earth, but if salt has lost its taste, how shall its saltiness be restored? It is no longer good for anything except to be thrown out and trampled under people's feet.

You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hidden. Nor do people light a lamp and put it under a basket, but on a stand, and it gives light to all in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven (Matthew 5:13-16).

This means that as a pastor, you are called to equip your people to be salt and light. This in turn necessitates that you train them in knowing how to be a set-apart Christian. This sort of training comes by hearing sermons, week after week, that describe and differentiate the Christian as a blood-bought witness of Christ. It is also crucial that the church body understand that it needs no degree, no credential, and no voice from heaven to be activated as an embodiment of salt and light in their community, their world.

We discussed this in terms of William Wilberforce in the introduction. Wilberforce was not a pastor. But he was profoundly moved by the preaching and activism of John Newton and John Venn. If there was no Newton, there would have been no Wilberforce. No Venn, no Wilberforce. It is this simple in historical terms. If we would have the slave trade ended, we would need not only a high-flown politician of sterling talent and an enviable network, but a preacher of the Word. The Word is what made Wilberforce what he became. Sermons were his diet. Exposition was his food. He practiced public ethics because his pastor and his mentor commended and preached public theology as the Bible presented it.

Newton awoke a young Wilberforce to the evils of the slave trade in 1787. On October 28, a Sunday, the two men had a lengthy conversation that led Wilberforce to pen a now-famous entry in his diary. "God Almighty has set before me two great objects: the suppression of the Slave Trade and the Reformation of Manners." We do not know the specifics of the

conversation that preceded this momentous—and ultimately predictive—statement, but it is clear that Newton exercised a powerful effect on his young charge. The very next day, Wilberforce contacted the Quakers, who were known for their persistent if underappreciated campaign to end slavery. Clearly, through Newton’s vibrant pastoral counsel, God set the wheels of history in motion.⁷

Newton continued to talk with Wilberforce over the years, and the politician came to hear him preach at St. Mary’s Woolnoth in London. In the late-1780s, Newton wrote the famous pamphlet *Thoughts Upon the African Slave Trade*, testified before Parliament on the horrors of slavery, and supported the burgeoning abolitionist cause among evangelicals. He was a powerful force in British society for the cause of abolition and lended Wilberforce no small amount of aid in his work.

But it was Venn who provided Wilberforce with a steady diet of pulpit instruction. Were every person to live godly, Venn once thundered, “No scenes of cruelty would shock the eye; no cry of oppression would wound the ear. Tyranny and slavery would be only remembered with a sigh that human nature should once have suffered them.”⁸ Every person did not live in such a way, however, and so it was the duty of Christians to show the world the virtues of faith:

Benevolence towards our fellow-creatures will produce true religion by depriving the heart of every angry passion, and leading us to sympathize in all the happiness of our fellow-creatures. The *hope of glory* will gild every prospect in life, and render all its afflictions light. *Trust in God* will impart abiding comfort to us, “for God will keep him in perfect peace who trusteth in him.” Above all, the *love of God* is an unceasing source of happiness; for this will make us satisfied with every dispensation of our Heavenly Father, and gladden our hearts in the view of his infinite goodness.⁹

These swatches of Venn’s preaching show that his heart was attuned to human suffering and the need of justice in the world. He did not hold back from preaching on ethical matters relevant to his Clapham context. In one famous address for the Church Missionary Society, he suggested rhetorically that Christians had done much to advance the cause of justice in the world:

Was a single hospital founded through their persuasion? Were schools provided through their suggestions for instruction of the inferior orders? Did they bear testimony against slavery? Or was the civil state of the poor at all meliorated by their labours?¹⁰

Venn preached directly against the slave trade. Yet his sermons also suggest that the primary way that believers could influence their context was by living godly lives characterized by love, hope, and trust. This life was no mere exercise in piety, but was anchored in the very nature of Almighty God.¹¹

This pulpit ministry moved parishioners like Wilberforce to action. Yet the young man came to see that many Christians did not have what he had. Believers had too often seen their faith as inherently private and thus without connection to the greater struggles unfolding in their world. In his famous book, [A Practical View of Christianity](#), Wilberforce decried the severing of theology from ethics in his native land:

The fatal habit of considering Christian morals as distinct from Christian doctrines insensibly gained strength. Thus the peculiar doctrines of Christianity went more and more out of sight, and as might naturally have been expected, the moral system itself also began to wither and decay, being robbed of that which should have supplied it with life and nutriment.¹²

It is appropriate to read this passage as a verdict on the sleeping consciences of English Christians. Why did so few speak out against slavery and the slave trade? Why were the Quakers a lone voice years before the Clapham Sect mobilized against these evils? There are likely numerous factors, but a crucial one is this: the church’s doctrinal interest was weak. Where this happens, as Wilberforce notes, “the moral system itself” also begins “to wither and decay,” for it has been “robbed” of its ballast.

This is a powerful charge from a wise man. If the pulpit is theologically weak and ethically disengaged, the church's call to be salt and light in a decaying, darkening world will go unheeded. The people will focus on their 401ks, their vacations, their school sports. Their faith will shrink. They will embrace "prosperity lite" theology such that they come to think that Christianity is fundamentally about their security and comfort. They will lose sight of the fact that they have been appointed as gospel agents in their communities, and that if they go silent, few exist who can take up the work.

The pastor is the one who stands against these woeful trends. The pastor must fundamentally and continually remind the people of their distinct identity and their divine calling. *We are not here for ourselves*, the pastor must regularly preach. *We are here for the lost, and we are called to work while there is day to oppose evil and promote righteousness.*

In this way, the pastor avoids making the pulpit political in the stereotypical way. He does not usually comment on ballot initiatives and candidates. But he is fearless in forming in his people the theistic and ethical convictions embedded in the Word. He is unapologetic about calling sins both ancient and modern what they are. He nurtures his people's instinct for justice, debasing injustice wherever appropriate—social, racial, economic, and otherwise. Like Newton with the young Wilberforce, he offers counsel to his congregants that helps them probe the dimensions of their vocations and callings.

He does not hold back from encouraging his people to be who they already are in Jesus Christ: salt and light.

3) Pastors can call their people to love their neighbors.

In Mark 12:31, Jesus details the second greatest commandment, the one that follows from the first: loving God with everything you have. Jesus tells his disciples that "The second is this: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' There is no other commandment greater than these."

Christianity suffers from a malnourished doctrine of "neighbor-love." Such a doctrine does indeed mean baking cookies and befriending our neighbors, each a revolutionary action in a world that celebrates bowling alone. But it means much more than this. There is a world of activity and agency in the second commandment. We would be advised, like the crew of a spaceship in a Christopher Nolan space epic, to explore this world.

Texts like James 1:27 illuminate what neighbor-love can and should look like. "Religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father," James says, "is this: to visit orphans and widows in their affliction, and to keep oneself unstained from the world." If we would claim to walk purely before God, we must be practicing "actional" faith. The Lord wants our faith to have an edge, to be directed in some way at those who cannot care for themselves. Christian faith is not only vertical, aimed toward the heavens. Christian faith is aimed at the whole world.

We cannot singlehandedly "change the world," as we are sometimes told. We yearn to instantaneously overcome evil and instantiate goodness, but we are finite, limited creatures. So much of what is wrong in our realm will only be made right by Christ when he comes in glory. Until he does, however, God intends for us to be reaching into the darkness. He wants us to love our neighbor not only by speaking, but by acting on their behalf. He wants us not simply to critique the darkness, but to plunge into it.

We do so not as lone rangers, but as the church, led by faithful pastors. As the pastor preaches the whole counsel of God, he builds the convictional framework of his people. The gospel creates ethics. The people, in turn, begin to see in ways great and small how they can love their neighbor. They can volunteer at a homeless shelter, counsel abortion-minded women at clinics, mentor fatherless boys in their neighborhood, start a soccer league for struggling teens, and invite refugees from war-torn countries to their homes for dinner. None of these actions will likely make the evening news. None of them require a massive programmatic structure or even budgetary investment on the church's part. All of these and many other forms of neighbor-love are small, incidental, humble, and gospel-driven. All of them are deeply meaningful.

As the church hears about such efforts, and prays for members who are loving their neighbors near and far, a cycle of investment begins. The gospel is seen not as a means to an end, but a message that creates a way of life. As this happens, the church shows the world that Christ's body is a dynamic, others-centered institution. More than this, it reveals that it is not a culture, but the true culture. As Stanley Hauerwas and William Willimon have argued, it demonstrates that it "embodies a social alternative that the world cannot on its own terms know."¹³

TRUE CULTURE IS OFTEN COUNTER-CULTURE

If pastors do not preach the true culture, then no one will. This is the essential reality of our modern situation: voices who speak for the permanent things, who advocate for the good, true, and beautiful in the public realm, are disappearing. In days past in America, pastors could assume that a coalition of institutions and individuals stood alongside them in their work to strengthen marriages, help the weak, rescue the fatherless, and champion the good of the family.

Today, there are fewer and fewer like-minded partners in the public square. Our government looms ever larger, suggesting in a friendly but insistent voice that it can solve our problems, fix our families, and cure our ills. With hesitation, and a vague sense that this might not be a good choice, we cede it the ground it requests. With resignation, we sigh, *Sure, government. You can fix my problems. You can teach my children sexual ethics. You can regulate my home. That's fine—after all, who else is offering to help?*

Christians increasingly buy into this mindset, failing to see that Caesar offers us not only a political program, but a theological system. The state can be our god, and our friend. The state can be our salvation. The state can give us meaning. The state is ready and eager to teach us theology, a theology of itself. If we doubt this tendency on the part of the state, we must reconsider the lessons of the totalitarian twentieth-century. Have Whittaker Chambers, Hannah Arendt, and Alexander Solzhenitsyn spoken—and suffered—for nothing?

When Caesar encroaches, Christians go numb. Pastors stop forming principles in their people borne of Scripture. They leave it to other voices to shape their people. But the church today must rouse itself. Pastors today are tempted to think that they need not equip their people for public-square witness. That, they have been told, is the job of professional ethicists. They do not see that they have been appointed by God to stand on the front lines of theological and ethical formation. The view that others will take up the public cross we are called to carry is a fiction, a pleasing illusion. In reality, those who would stand for the good, true, and beautiful are vanishing like shadows passing on the mountains.

Let us make this as practical as we can.

- If pastors will not speak for marriage, who will?
- If pastors will not speak for the unborn baby, who will?
- If pastors will not equip the congregation to reach the fatherless young men who tear up their communities out of anger, who will?
- If pastors will not speak a word on behalf of religious liberty, but will allow it to be taken from them with nary a word, who will?
- If pastors will not instruct the youth of the congregation in biblical sexual ethics, views directly opposed by the culture, who will?

Let us see a generation of pastors who does not go quietly into the night. Let us witness a generation of pastors proclaim the whole counsel of God from Scripture, forming their people both theologically and ethically as they do so. The pulpit is not political. But the pulpit must be convictional. We are not yet a people weakened by the state, crippled by Caesar, as pastors were in Germany and Russia and China in the twentieth-century. They lost their voice. They could

not offer protest. They could not equip the church to be what it fundamentally is: a witness, a sign and symbol of the true culture, and the dwelling-place of God.

In a fallen world, the true culture must often be a counter-culture. It must make the case that a secular kingdom does not want it to make. It must, like Christ and the apostle Paul, offer protest against injustice (John 18:23; Acts 22). We must not muzzle ourselves, for the prophets and apostles did not do so. We must make our case and preach the gospel. As long as we have strength, we must speak and act as the true culture. By our word and congregational witness, we must be a counter-culture to bring life to a secular culture that is in many respects an anti-culture.

CONCLUSION

Filling this role will be a lonely task. It was for William Wilberforce. It was for John Venn. We laud Wilberforce today for his successful campaign, but he paid a mighty price for it. We note Venn's name, but he is unknown today, forgotten despite his epoch-making influence.

But as we think about Venn, and about Newton, we are reminded that the cause of Christ is a humble one. It is not a call to glory. It is a call to self-sacrifice. It is a call to be a man of conscience, unafraid of what the world may do, unashamed of the gospel. It is a summons to equip the church to be salt and light, to love its neighbor, to collectively seek and pray for the advancement of the kingdom over every corner of the earth.

The pastor who preaches for the transformation of his people is equipping them for service in this life that will echo into eternity. As he forms the doctrine and ethics of his flock, he is pleasing the Lord. To return to our original query, he is passing the Wilberforce test, preaching such that his people can plunge into the darkness.

The question before us today is this: will we?

Editor's note: This essay is an expansion of the author's talk at T4G 2014: "[The Pastor as Public Theologian in an Increasingly Hostile Culture](#)."

¹ See Jonathan Aitken, *John Newton: From Disgrace to Amazing Grace* (Crossway, 2003), 314-17; Eric Metaxas, *William Wilberforce and the Heroic Campaign to End Slavery* (HarperOne, 2007), 185.

² R. Albert Mohler Jr., *He Is Not Silent: Preaching in a Postmodern World* (Chicago: Moody, 2008), 106.

³ Mark Dever, *The Church: The Gospel Made Visible* (Nashville: B&H, 2012), xi.

⁴ Mohler, *He Is Not Silent*, 107.

⁵ See John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 2.6.1.

⁶ William H. Willimon, *Pastor: The Theology and Practice of Ordained Ministry* (Abingdon, 2002), 209.

⁷ See Jonathan Aitken, *John Newton*, 309-312.

⁸ John Venn, "Godliness Profitable to All Things," *Sermons of the Rev. John Venn, M. A., Rector of Clapham, Three Volumes in Two*, vol. II (Boston: R. P. & C. Williams, S. Etheridge, 1822), 22.

⁹ John Venn, "On the Nature of True Religion," *Sermons*, 247.

¹⁰ "John Venn—The Forgotten Center of the Clapham Sect," *Kairos Journal*, accessible at <http://kairosjournal.org/document.aspx?DocumentID=5092&QuadrantID=2&CategoryID=10&TopicID=17&L=1>.

¹¹ Venn also derived into more directly political matters at times. Wilberforce sometimes took Venn's sermons home with him as a guide to thinking through governmental policy. See Michael Hennel, *John Venn and the Clapham Sect* (London: Lutterworth Press, 1958), 198.

[12 William Wilberforce](#), *A Practical View of Preferred Christianity* (Cosimo, 2005), 205. Originally published as *A Practical View of the Prevailing Religious System of Professed Christians, in the Higher and Middle Classes, Contrasted with Real Christianity* (1820).

[13 Stanley Hauerwas](#) and William Willimon, *Resident Aliens: Life in the Christian Colony* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1989), 17–18.



With Mark Dever and Jonathan Leeman

Denominational and Cultural Decline and Pastoral Prayers: An Interview with Mark Dever

JONATHAN LEEMAN: I want to think with you about denominational decline, cultural decline, and pastoral prayers.

MARK DEVER: Okay.

DENOMINATIONAL DECLINE

LEEMAN: We were recently at an event at which there was much talk about denominational decline. Does denominational decline, at least as defined by dropping baptisms, concern you? Are they understanding it rightly?

DEVER: Well, yes and no. It concerns me in that I want to see more people being baptized and more people coming to Christ. I don't assume that all the statistics of a denomination, let alone all denominations, are going to be a perfect reflection of that. For example, our church has not reported the statistics to our denomination for 20 years now, since I have been here.

LEEMAN: Serious decline according to them.

DEVER: That's right! They could assume we're just in a horrible state, when in fact, we've been baptizing, I don't know, scores of people every year. But you know what? I don't need their totals to know this. It brings me no benefit whatsoever, and I tend to think many can be drunk on statistics. So we're just going to say "the Lord knows"; we're just going to keep doing our thing, and they can be surprised in Heaven how fruitful it was.

PASTORAL PRAYERS AS INSTRUCTION

LEEMAN: How does this talk of denominational decline—and let me broaden it flatly—how does this talk of cultural decline, where we look around us and it seems that the West is increasingly post Christian and increasingly *not* nominal, affect your pastoral prayers?

DEVER: I think in our pastoral prayers, we have more opportunity to comment on current events than in any other setting. And what's instructive is that our people see us present these things before the Lord and notice how we talk to the Lord about them.

I pray about everything. I prayed for the Quakers last Sunday, that the gospel would spread among the Quakers. I prayed two Sundays before that for God in his mercy to allow our culture to once again to consider it immoral for an unmarried man and woman to live together. I want to be aggressive in my prayers. I want to look across the landscape and just try to think, "How can we as a church ask God for big things for his glory?"

PASTORAL PRAYERS AND TEACHING THE RIGHT POSTURE

LEEMAN: Isn't it easy, though, to fall into alarmism?

DEVER: Yeah! That's why you have to believe Matthew 16, that this church thing is going to work, that it's not in any danger. It's not under threat, so we pray in confidence.

And almost every week I'll pray about some issues of public authority and sometimes about matters that are controversial in the public realm. But I try to never to do that in a way that would be heard by people as narrowly partisan.

And you know, in that sense, I'm trying to bring to bear God's Word on abortion, divorce, homosexuality, the PC-USA declining, gay bishops, the fact that more Southern Baptist churches are getting smaller than larger, that we need more money for the International Mission Board. Whatever the topic, I ask, how then do I talk about that before the Lord? Well, that's an opportunity to disciple the congregation even as they hear how I am not alarmed, but that I'm grieved, confident, and dependent. All of those things are useful for them to hear.

PRAYING FOR THOSE IN AUTHORITY

LEEMAN: I've heard you say "Lord, you tell us to pray for those in authority over us . . ." and then you proceed to pray for leaders in Hollywood?

DEVER: Yeah, the music industry.

LEEMAN: Public schools?

DEVER: Yeah. And transportation workers.

LEEMAN: How is that useful?

DEVER: Because if people think that authority is just the king, the emperor, or the president, then they're missing the way authority intersects with life in so many ways. There's probably nobody you're seeing every day who does not exercise some kind of authority. So, by the time you get to a teacher in a schoolroom, let alone a principle of a school, let alone a council member of a school or a superintendent of a school, you're dealing with some serious amounts of authority there.

Every sphere of life is "thick" with invisible lines of authority, and I think making those visible is a part of rendering them to the Lord. It's a part of understanding that none of these things operate independently of God and his sovereignty, his will, his pleasure, his desires. When we sing "All I Have is Christ," part of what that means is we need to recognize that the police should act as agents of Christ, the real estate agent should act as an agent of Christ, the boss at the

workplace should act as an agent of Christ. Everybody sitting there in my congregation is in various roles throughout the week, and in every way they exercise authority they are doing so under the Lordship of Christ.

GETTING KUYPERIAN?

LEEMAN: It's the way you get your most Kuyperian without blurring creation-redemption lines and without becoming partisan.

DEVER: Right! One should ask, "Was Kuyper's political party and program a historical success?" Kuyper was certainly "right" in that he understood the universality of Christ's Lordship. He was, I think, wrong if he assumed that this Lordship meant that there would be an obvious victory of Christ before his return in all of these spheres, and even furthermore, that it would come through him and his instrumentalities.

LEEMAN: And your prayers are a way of striking the balance.

DEVER: They're attempting to.

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By Jonathan Leeman

Cultural Opposition: Lie Down, Lean In, Lay Low, or Leave

Do we always have to fight to be faithful?

There are four basic responses available to Christians and churches in the face of cultural opposition. We can *lie down* and so surrender our stand and our faith. We can *lean into* the opposition by being vocal about our beliefs, willing to “take it on the chin.” We can *lay low* by taking great caution in airing those parts of our beliefs that the culture finds offensive. Or we get *leave*. Get out of Dodge.

It is always sin to *lie down*. It is never sin to *lean in*, though sometimes it is not wise. Sometimes it is wise to *lay low* or even to *leave*, though occasionally these amount to sinful *lying down*.

One of the greater challenges for Christians throughout history has been determining when to lean in and when to lay low or to leave, as well as when laying low or leaving amounts to sinful lying down.

LIE DOWN

Lying down comes in two basic forms: explicit and implicit. And both forms are sinful. “Whoever denies me before men, I will also deny him before My Father in heaven” (Matt. 10:33). The Christian *lapsi* in the early church who offered incense to Caesar, thereby affirming Caesar’s supremacy over Jesus, explicitly denounced him. So did the Japanese converts in seventeenth-century Japan who denounced Christ by stepping on a bronze-plated image.

Christians and churches who continue to maintain the Christian name, but let outside authorities dictate which beliefs are acceptable, have implicitly laid down. One thinks of the Nazi-submitting German Evangelical Church. Karl Barth’s Barmen Declaration, which declared that Jesus and not the *Führer* was the head of the church, offered a good picture to the contrary.

Perhaps somewhere in between the implicit and explicit acts of lying down—and just as sinfully culpable—are Christians who deny particular doctrines and adopt more culturally respectable forms of Christianity. Enlightenment-era liberals who called themselves “Christian” yet denied the resurrection or Virgin birth come to mind, as do many other examples of those today who would alter historic Christian teachings in a societally favorable direction. The goal isn’t always to be “culturally respectable.” Deniers may genuinely believe they are conforming with “the facts” or a better hermeneutic. But finally they listen to man more than God (see Gen 3:17), and they sinfully lie down. Not all sin is intentional (see Lev. 4).

LEAN IN

Leaning in can also take two forms: active and passive. Evangelism is the most concrete form of “actively” leaning in. Evangelism walks a person straight into opposition.

So it was when Jesus declared that the kingdom had arrived in him, or when Paul showed up in synagogues or the Areopagus. Surely one of the most jaw-dropping biblical examples of actively leaning was Paul returning to Lystra immediately after they stoned him!

There is a secondary sense in which battling for biblical righteousness or justice can be viewed as a form of active leaning-in, even if the name of Jesus is not explicit. William Wilberforce’s quest for biblical justice against the slave-trade might count as such an example, even if the quest was not specifically tied to the name of Christ. Churches or Christian leaders today that stand up for a biblical view of marriage might be regarded as leaning in in this secondary sense.

Martyrdom is the most concrete form of “passively” leaning in. A Christian is asked to deny, to denounce, to tear, to step, to betray, to offer up—all upon threat of pain, imprisonment, or death. But his or her posture is to stand still. He or she refuses to do what’s asked. Then the lions come. Or the flames burn. Or the sword swings.

So it was with everyone from Polycarp to John and Betty Stam. And countless others.

It is hard to imagine a situation in which leaning into cultural opposition by standing up for the name of Christ or for biblical justice is sin. In fact, I cannot think of one: real or hypothetical.

“I will also speak of your testimonies before kings and shall not be put to shame” (Ps. 119:46).

LAY LOW

Yet not every fight is worth having, not every hill is worth dying on. Sometimes it is better to lay low.

Daniel and the three Hebrew boys picked a few famous fights with their pagan kings, to be sure. But this wasn’t their only approach. The chief of the eunuchs feared losing his own head for not feeding them from the king’s table. So Daniel suggested a surreptitious 10-day “test” of their program.

Jesus avoided head-on confrontations at multiple points. He did this when telling the Pharisees to give to Caesar what is Caesar’s and to God what is God’s. He also did this by saying he came for the sick, not the healthy, knowing the Pharisees regarded themselves as healthy. And of course he tried to keep his messianic identity a secret for a time.

Paul, too, had Timothy circumcised in order to avoid disruption. And perhaps he had something of laying low in mind when he tells us to seek peaceful and quiet lives?

Might we even construe Naaman’s decision to let the king of Syria lean upon his arm while worshipping an idol as a judicious act of laying low? Elisha, at least, affirmed it.

The wise pastor or Christian in the workplace must sometimes decide, “This is not a war worth waging.”

The \$64,000-dollar question is knowing when to lean in and when to lay low. Laying low *can* be a form of compromise. A church that believes all the right things, but never preaches sin, hell, or anything that offends the citizens of its host culture, is a compromised church. So with the Christian who never stands up in the workplace. They are like salt that has lost its saltiness. You might as well throw it out. (See Andrew Wilson’s *Sexuality and Silence* [here](#).)

That said, I have seen evangelists lead out with points of agreement as well as points of disagreement, both to great effect.

How do you know when to lean in and when to lay low? To some extent, the answer depends on personal temperament. If you are a natural born fighter, you just might need to practice laying low from time to time. If you are like most people, however, you might practice leaning into the opposition more often.

It also depends on who you are talking to: admonish the idol, encourage the fainthearted, help the weak, be patient with them all (1 Thess. 5:14).

Beyond this, the decision depends on the multitude of circumstances that make up any given historical moment. No Christian should make such decisions by him or herself, but seek guidance from fellow-elders or church members. And pastors should solicit counsel from other churches. How foolish to go into battle paying no heed to one's own platoon, or seeking to coordinate with other platoons!

Sometimes, of course, God sovereignly removes the option of laying low. He caused a servant girl to recognize Peter's accent, blowing his cover. For such moments we pray that God would also grant the courage to lean in and not lie down.

LEAVE

The more drastic form of laying low is actually leaving. Like laying low, leaving can be both wise and unwise, righteous or sinful, depending on the circumstances.

At one point in his ministry, Cyprian hid from persecution. At another point, he stayed and stood. Both decisions may have been right for the occasion. Some independent pastors in sixteenth century Britain went to prison. Others fled to Holland or the American colonies. Both responses, in principle, could have been correct, depending on the person. If I were pastoring a church in Iraq and ISIS was on the doorstep, I would probably tell my congregants to flee. If I were in Iran, I might not.

Not all acts of running away are righteous. Some are sin. The disciples sinfully abandoned Jesus in the Garden.

When might it be legitimate to leave as opposed to lay low or lean in? Perhaps when one's life is at stake. Or when one's family is no longer free to worship Jesus Christ and bear witness to him.

Certainly there are times to stay when the stakes are that high, too. I'm grateful Christians remain in Iran, and I pray there are Christians quietly evangelizing in Saudi Arabia and North Korea. Such decisions to stay are heroic and often godly.

That said, seldom should a pastor lean into the consciences of church members and exhort them to stay and face death rather than flee, such that members feel like they are sinning by leaving. He might set the example himself and instruct them from the Word generally, but he should leave such specific decisions to their consciences and the Holy Spirit.

LOVE AND ETERNITY

Two things distort our judgment on when to lean in versus when to lay low or to leave: fear of man and a lack of love.

Two things to correct our gauge: fear of God and love. If the Day of Judgment barely flashes on your mental radar, you will often make the wrong calculation. Eternity-mindedness is one fix. Compassion, understanding, and a concern for the whole flock the other.

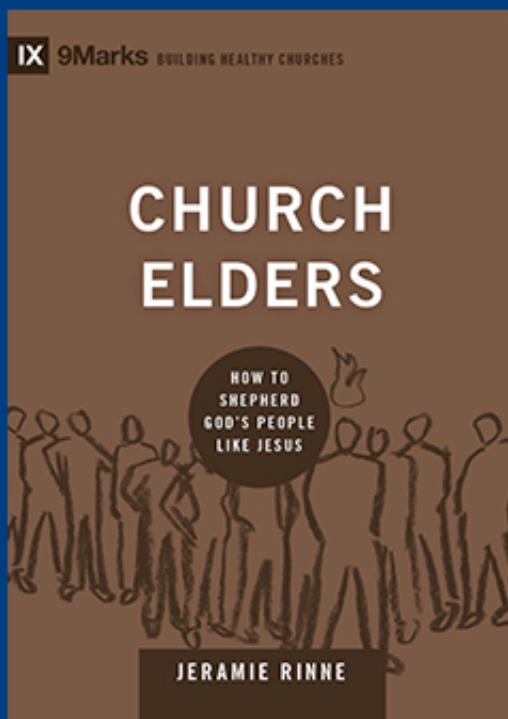
The ministry of the pulpit, finally, will mostly lean in. Because the Bible leans in. Because God leans in. With holiness and judgment, compassion and grace, God leans in.

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By Greg Cochran

Blessed Are the Persecuted

I recently read this quote from a famous televangelist: “Chase God, and his blessings will chase you.”

I actually think he’s right. The only thing is, I’m not sure I agree with the televangelist’s concept of *blessing*. This evangelist has multiple homes, a private jet, a fleet of cars, and tax-free cash on hand. These are the blessings he says will chase you if you chase God.

Blessings *will* chase you if you chase God, but the Bible promises the “blessings” of persecution will chase after you.

NOT WHAT WE EXPECT

How do you know when you are blessed?

NFL players who get paid 6 million bucks a year to catch passes are “blessed,” right? And beautiful actresses who make 4 million dollars a movie? Safe neighborhoods, swimming pools out back, nice green spaces, steady healthcare—these are blessings to most Americans.

Christians, of course, know better. We would say we are blessed when we have peaceful, thriving marriages and families.

But what about Abera Ongeremu? Is he blessed? Ongeremu is a Christian and an evangelist of a different sort, a traveling evangelist. He was visiting at a church in Olenkomi, Ethiopia, when members of the Orthodox Church there stormed the evangelical church building in which he was staying.¹ They ordered him to burn his Bible. He replied that he would not burn the Word of life—so they decided to burn him. They tied his hands, poured diesel all over the room, started the fire, and locked the doors. Ongeremu was certain this was his day to die, but his persecutors weren’t satisfied that their diabolical scheme was a sufficient outpouring of torture. Thus, they dragged him back out of the burning church and beat him until he fell unconscious on the ground. Ongeremu did not die that day.

Would we call Ongeremu blessed or cursed? Jesus would call him blessed: “Blessed are those who have been persecuted for the sake of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven (Matt. 5:10).

I doubt that we mean for anything like this to happen when we say to someone, “God bless you.” Quite the opposite! We hope God will show favor through the job, the award, the promotion, the house, the admission to the school, even the world’s favor.

In the New Testament, however, persecution is a blessing. “Blessed are you when people insult you and persecute you, and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me” (Matt. 5:11). Blessedness in the Bible is something more and different from what we had imagined.

GOD’S PRESENCE AND INVINCIBILITY

In fact, blessedness is directly related to relationship with Christ, not to material prosperity. The Lord does not say “rejoice and be glad” when you move into a big house. Instead, he warns that it is hard for a rich person to enter the kingdom of heaven (cf. Matt. 19:24). He also tells us to “rejoice and be glad” when we are persecuted, for our reward in heaven is great (Matt. 5:12).

To be blessed means that Christ is present with you (Matt. 28:20). And such divine presence makes one invincible. When we are made alive in Christ, we cannot be threatened with death or any of death’s allies because death only promises to bring us nearer into the presence of Christ. To be absent in the body is to be present with the Lord (2 Cor 5:8).

In Christ, we will never be defeated, like Ongeremu. In Christ, we can value life and death properly, like Moses who forewent the passing pleasures of Egypt to attain the eternal promises of God.

THE TELEVANGELIST WAS RIGHT!

If blessings chase after those who chase after God, as the televangelist said, then what will a *truly* blessed life look like? It just might mean that danger and suffering will chase after you. Jesus promised this: “But I chose you out of the world, therefore the world hates you” (John 15:19); “You will be hated by all for my name’s sake” (Matt. 10:22).

Paul made the same promise: “Indeed, all who desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted” (2 Tim. 3:12).

So the televangelist was right! Blessings will pursue the one who chases God, but the blessings will be *biblical*, not material. And one of the blessings may be persecution (Matt. 5:10-12; 1 Pet. 4:14).

THOUGH HE DIES, HE LIVES

True blessings might make our lives less like the televangelist jet-setter and more like Abera Ongeremu or Alphonso Argento. In the fall of 1895, Argento made his way from his native Sicily to London, where he underwent extensive training for China Inland Mission. In his initial interview with China Inland Mission, the Mission warned about the dangers of preaching the gospel in China. His reply: *“I am not afraid even to die for Christ and the gospel. I was led to take this step after having known Christ’s promise, ‘Blessed are they which are persecuted for righteousness’ sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.”*²

Jesus promised persecution; Argento expected it from the beginning. Jesus also promised eternal life; Argento trusted that, too.

Eventually Argento arrived in China. The country was growing more and more unstable, as many nationalists were growing violently intolerant of Christian missionaries. In July of 1900, the Boxer Rebellion was underway, and the mission station in Henan Province—where Argento was serving—was attacked. Argento was beaten, thrown on a pile of wood, and burned. But he did not die that day. With the help of others, he escaped momentarily.

Then he was stopped and beaten again. This final beating rendered him unconscious. But still, he did not die. More taunting and ridicule from the locals would follow. They told him, “Your God cannot save you. Jesus is dead; he is not in

this world. He cannot give you real help. Our god of war is much stronger; he protects us, and he has sent the Boxers to pull down your house and kill you.”

Argento succumbed to his injuries 17 years later and died. But today in the Guangshan area where Argento served, God has raised an army of believers which numbers more than 120,000. Argento, an Italian grain of wheat, suffered and died in China. But, dying, this grain of wheat brought forth much fruit. Everything turned out just as Jesus promised. And Argento never lost the blessing of eternal life. Though he died, he lives (see John 11:26).

[1 Hattaway](#), Paul. *China's Christian Martyrs* (Oxford: Monarch Books, 2007) 326. This story is adapted from Hattaway's book, which can be found here.

[2 Reported by World Watch Monitor](#), "Christians in Ethiopian Town Hit by Unexpected Attack Published: April 15, 2010 by Simba Tian, accessed [online] <https://www.worldwatchmonitor.org/2010/04-April/17341/> (August 21, 2014).

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By Daniel Bays

Blossoming Flowers Where Mao Wasn't Looking

The following is a lightly adapted excerpt from Daniel H. Bays, [A New History of Christianity in China](#) (Wiley-Blackwell, 2011), and is reprinted by permission of the publisher and the author. We have adopted the headline from Mao's famous line about letting a hundred flowers blossom.

It appears in retrospect that the Cultural Revolution as a national event, seen at the time as an unmitigated disaster for the church, was actually of great assistance to the growth of Christianity in many places in China.

Mao Zedong's 'Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution' that he launched in 1966 was not aimed primarily at Christians or Christianity. It was aimed at removing from power several top leaders of the communist party, his close colleagues for decades. Since these leaders controlled the Party apparatus, Mao had to seek elsewhere for allies; he found them in the People's Liberation Army (PLA) and the youth of the nation, mainly of college and high school age.

In their zeal to do Chairman Mao's bidding, these young people ran amok in cities all across the land, hounding people who were vulnerable (for example, those who ever had ever had any contact at all with foreigners), ransacking their homes, often beating them, sometimes to death. Or they made public spectacles of their victims, torturing and humiliating them, causing yet more thousands of suicides. This early phase of the Cultural Revolution was the one that most affected Chinese Christians. In countless places, Christians were put through such abuse that many did not survive the ordeal.

As Mao and his fellow perpetrators of the Cultural Revolution envisioned it, all truth would spring from "the people" (spoken for by Mao), through "class struggle" (that is, violence). Any ideology other than Mao's interpretation of Marxism-Leninism was heresy. At this point, still early in the Cultural Revolution (fall 1966 to late 1967), all religions were abolished, and all houses of worship were closed. This was the only time in the past sixty years that a nationwide eradication policy for Christianity was attempted (though some local governments did so in the late 1950s). The only concession the regime granted would come in the early 1970s, when more foreigners were living in China and the Christians among them needed a place to worship.

From 1967 on, the entire next ten or eleven years of Christian history in China are still a black hole, the details of which are very scarce. There are almost no documentary sources to consult, no statistics, very few photographs (and those of uncertain provenance). We are left with the anecdotal stories of things that happen to people individually or that they personally witnessed during these years. With the life and death struggle for power going on at the top, few were paying attention to the results of the Cultural Revolution at the bottom of society. The party, government, and other authority structures at the local level all over the country were paralyzed or dismantled by the chaos of the Cultural Revolution. Anarchy ensued in some areas, with groups of Red Guards, radical workers, and others engaged in deadly armed warfare. In other areas, coalitions of army, party, and government representatives maintained a fragile stability. The PLA maintained an uneasy sway over the country as a whole, pending the resurrection of the party and the government.

The overall result seems similar to what happened in the Dominican mission of northeast Fujian Province in the Ming-Qing transition of the mid-17th century. The turmoil of the Cultural Revolution in similar fashion gave Christianity an opening, an opportunity to grow. All churches during these years were by definition house churches, and some proved very adept at adjusting to the new situation. Talented and charismatic leaders emerged among the believers and proved to be effective evangelists, recruiting many new converts. Despite the almost total lack of empirical evidence, my guess is that Protestants increased their numbers by a factor of five or six during the 12 years from 1966 to 1978, when churches reopened.

Obviously this level of analysis is very crude. Conditions varied around the country, and different factors were undoubtedly at play. The message preached by the evangelists was largely (as far as we can tell) the old, pre-1949 salvationist and revivalist message typical of most theologically conservative missionaries such as those of the China Inland Mission and the Chinese leaders like John Sung, Watchman Nee, and Wang Mingdao. It was millenarian, looking to the imminent return of Christ, and it was to an extensive degree Pentecostal, that is, highlighting “gifts of the spirit” such as speaking in tongues, prophecies, and miraculous healings. Some of the old sectarian enthusiasm of the True Jesus Church and Watchman Nee’s teachings have provided renewed impetus to grow. In fact, many home churches at this time were in effect shaped by True Jesus input or by followers of Nee (who died in a prison camp in 1972). I am not sure we can go much further than these observations about the kind of Protestant development that took place during the Cultural Revolution, or if the later crossover between Protestant and Chinese folk religion or popular religion was already occurring. Finally: my estimate is five to six million Protestants, and a very rapid growth rate in the late 1970s.

Thus Protestants emerged from the Cultural Revolution after 1976 in a dynamic mode, spreading culturally and naturally.

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By Phillip Jensen

The Vanishing Church?

Lessons from “Down Under”

Australia and America are religiously different. Can you imagine an American President who was a self-professed Atheistic Socialist, living in the White House with her current boyfriend whom she refused to marry because, as a feminist, she didn't believe in marriage? That describes the Australian prime minister from 2010 to 2013. I doubt that this would be a CV considered electable by any American political party.

AUSTRALIAN DISTINCTIVES

Australia's history and mythology are different to America's. We do not have the ennobling light of the city on a hill, nor the persecution and fight for religious freedom of the Pilgrim Fathers, nor the annual reminder of Thanksgiving.

It was because the British could no longer dump their convicts on American shores that they dumped us in “Botany Bay.” So Australia's historical mythology is that of convicts and gold diggers without any religious theme other than hostility between Irish Catholics and British Protestants, and general antagonism toward all authority, especially religious authority.

This is not to say the mythology is true, either in America or in Australia. Mythology is Mythology, not history. All over Australia, home-sick Europeans built churches representing their homeland. Amongst them were fine Christian people who sought to live under Christ's lordship and evangelise their neighbours, especially the indigenous peoples.

By the mid-twentieth century a staid, semi-British, and very middle class way of life had come upon the nation. This included religious instruction, even in state schools, Sunday school attendance by most children, and occasional church attendance by a large proportion of the community. Australia was basically a mono-cultural community, whose cultural/moral/legal worldview was broadly Christian, at least in the areas of family life, bio-ethics, and education.

The social revolution of the 1960s wiped this Australia away. It was not so much an intellectual rejection of Christianity (though there was some of this) but a practical rejection of church life as people became prosperous and could afford to enjoy hedonistic materialism. From the 1970s, government legislation slowly whittled away the Christian worldview with constant reference to multi-culturalism. In reality it imposed a new mono-culturalism of a democratic, individualistic, utilitarian secularism whose ultimate moral standard is “the Australian way,” whose greatest criticism is that something is “un-Australian,” and whose mantra is “a free society.”

BAD NEWS FOR CHURCHES

So with this gross generalisation and oversimplification, what has been the effect on church life? I have not researched this carefully, just lived through it and observed it happening. So without research that could change these impressions and with all these reservations about how different Australia is, let me give you my perceptions of the gospel opportunities in a society that has moved away from Christianity.

Let me start with the bad news. We have become the enemy of the press and the chattering classes, for our un-Australian distinctiveness. The mode of Australian social control is “inclusive tolerance.” This is quite different to the Christian mode of “welcoming love.” Tolerance soon moves from “enduring what you don’t like” to “accepting whatever happens,” and so to relativism where “anything and everything is okay” —except criticism. Language gets bowdlerized into politically correct platitudes, and plain speech expressing biblical truth is unacceptable “extremism.” Whatever else Christians must do is not believe their Bible since such belief puts us in the same category as fanatical Muslims. Anti-discrimination and anti-vilification legislation, while not designed against us, is starting to be used against us.

DIFFERENT REACTIONS

Next, let me give you the analysis of the outcomes of the different reactions to the 1960s, for after 50 years we can see what has happened to the different churches and denominations.

Those who tried to hold firm to the old distinctives and traditions of European denominations slowly, steadily, and irreversibly declined. The congregations aged and were not replaced by the next generation.

The churches which tried to accommodate to the new society became liberal fairly rapidly and died as quickly. If a church is the same as society, why would anybody bother to join?

Some of those churches which gave away the scriptural distinctives and invented new forms of Christianity, sadly, survived and some have even flourished numerically and financially.

Not all, but only those churches who sought to return to the Bible and rethink the gospel for modern Australia are making slow and steady progress both in their growth and in reaching Australia with the gospel.

So in simple impact those churches who returned to the Bible have made solid progress, though some more spectacular impact has been made by strange new teachings like the prosperity gospel.

GOOD NEWS FOR CHURCHES

Finally, here are four pieces of good news.

Firstly, the departure of nominal adherents from the churches was good news because they took with them some of the hypocrisy and humbug of the religious social club. Their social control over the church, which put the gospel and evangelism as a low to non-existent priority, evaporated. This meant the church could be brought back to the centrality of the gospel. Our institutions (schools, retirement villages, refuges, youth camps, etc.) could return to their primary focus on the biblical Christ.

Secondly, while evangelism became more difficult and challenging, it has become more rewarding. Previously most evangelism took place within the fold of nominal members. Now we have to go outside the fold to people who have had no contact with the church for a couple of generations and usually not a skerrick of biblical knowledge. This has had the great effect of forcing us out of our Christian ghettos to reach quite unreached people. No longer can our churches be

ethnic tribal groupings celebrating their cultural roots and rites of passage through life. Based on the gospel, our multicultural churches exhibit something of “the manifold wisdom of God” (Eph. 3:10).

Thirdly, society suffered the consequences of ungodliness. For example, large numbers of children are raised in the dysfunctional homes of divorce and de facto marriages. This flows through society as each generation is less likely to be committed to marriage and raising children. It was easier for my parents to raise me and for me to raise my children than it is for my children to raise my grandchildren. While, sadly, society’s contagion of divorce is entering the Christian community, the Christian family still stands out as different. The way we raise our children has consciously become more distinct as we have to be more intentionally Christian in raising and educating our children. Christian schooling is an increasingly popular way not just for Christians, but also for the community to educate their children, and for us to influence the community with the gospel.

Fourthly, gaining immigrants from all over the world has provided new and wonderful missionary opportunities as we evangelise cross-culturally and reach people on our doorstep whom previous generations would never have met. While the old British community has apparently turned their back on God, the new non-British community are embracing the gospel in increasing numbers. Society on the move is society open to all manner of influences, including the gospel.

HONESTY AND HOLY DISTINCTIVENESS

It is easy to be depressed about the collapse of the culture in which you were raised and in which Christ found you. But it was the gospel, not the culture, that mattered in your conversion.

We are wrong to think that we are to create a Christian nation, since Christ’s kingdom is not of this world. Christendom was not Christian. Australia prior to the 1960’s was not Christian in theory or in practice. Today may be tougher for us in some ways. But there is an honesty and a holy distinctiveness in being a Christian in Australia today that makes the work of evangelism and the reality of church so much easier.

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By Michael Haykin

400-Year-Old Lessons from English Baptists and Persecution

Persecution and martyrdom are perennial features of the Church's existence in this world. Numerous New Testament passages bear out this fact (see, for example, 1 Peter 4:12–19; Acts 14:19–22; John 15:18–21). The experience of the Church down through the centuries has indeed been one of persecution and its concomitant, martyrdom. And although my focus is going to be on one period of this history, we need to recognize that this is not merely an issue of the past. It has been estimated that currently there are thousands martyrs every year around the world.

Now, the period that I wish to look at concerns the era of Particular (or Calvinistic) Baptist origins in the mid-seventeenth century. This Baptist movement had emerged from the womb of British Puritanism, and from seven congregations in London in 1644, they grew to roughly 130 in 1660. This was the era of the English Civil War and the English Republic—when Oliver Cromwell (1599–1658) was a prominent political figure and there was religious freedom for those who did not worship at the local Church of England parish. With the death of Cromwell in 1658, however, there was a growing fear of anarchy by the army generals who had fought beside him. In desperation, they committed themselves to the restoration of the monarchy in the person of Charles II (1660–1685), the so-called “Merry Monarch.” Those who came to power with Charles were determined to destroy the power of the Puritans. To achieve their end they passed an extensive piece of legislation known as the Clarendon Code (1661–1673), which included such acts as:

The Corporation Act (1661), which required all officials of cities and towns, “for preservation of the public peace both in Church and State,” to swear allegiance to the supremacy of the English monarch and to have taken in the year prior to taking office the sacrament of the Lord's Supper according to the rites of the Church of England.¹

The Act of Uniformity (1662), which required all worship in England and Wales to be done according to the *Book of Common Prayer* and required every minister to declare his “unfeigned assent and consent to all and every thing contained and prescribed” in it.

The First Conventicle Act (1664) that specified that for the first offence of being present at an illegal conventicle there would be a prison sentence of three months; for a second offence, imprisonment for six months; and for a third offence, exile for seven years unless a fine of £100 were paid.

The Five Mile Act (1665) forbade preaching “contrary to the laws and statutes” of England, required all preachers to swear that they would not “endeavour any alteration of government either in Church or State,” and fined any dissenter £40 who came “within five miles of any city” to preach or even to teach at any public or private school.²

A Second Conventicle Act (1670) proclaimed that “any person of the age of sixteen years or upwards...present at any assembly...under...pretence of any exercise of religion in other manner than...the Church of England” shall be fined 5 shillings; and “every person who shall wittingly...suffer any such conventicle,...to be held in his or her house, outhouse, barn, yard...shall forfeit the sum of twenty pounds.”³

The First Test Act (1673) again required all civil office holders and those holding commissioned office in the army or navy to take an oath of allegiance to the English monarch and to receive the Lord’s Table according to the rites of the Church of England and to declare that there is “not any transubstantiation in the sacrament of the Lord’s Supper.”⁴

Other acts after this period regarding burial and marriage made dissenters and non-conformists second-class citizens. This includes Calvinistic Baptists, Presbyterians, Congregationalists, and Quakers. Between 1660 and 1688, the Baptists—together with other Dissenters—who refused to go along with these laws often ended up paying substantial fines or experiencing life-threatening imprisonment.

Let us look briefly at some of those persecuted to see what we can learn regarding how we should respond to persecution.

THE EXPERIENCE OF JOHN BUNYAN (1628–1688)

John Bunyan was one of the first Baptists arrested for preaching. On November 12, 1660, he was scheduled to speak to a small group at a farmhouse in the hamlet called Lower Samsell, near Harlington, Bedfordshire. Even though a warrant had been issued for his arrest, he decided to go ahead and preach, for he was convinced that in preaching he was doing nothing wrong. The state, though, thought otherwise, and he was arrested just after he had opened God’s Word to read the text on which he was going to preach.

When Bunyan was put on trial he was accused of having broken the Elizabethan Conventicle Act of 1593 which specified that anyone who “devilishly and perniciously abstained from coming to Church i.e. the Church of England to hear Divine Service” and who was an “upholder of . . . unlawful meetings and conventicles” could be held without bail until he or she agreed to submit the authorities of the Anglican Church.⁵ In the eyes of the authorities, Bunyan was an uneducated, unordained common “mechanic.” And so it was made clear to Bunyan that he would be released if he promised to desist from preaching.

Bunyan, though, had a higher loyalty than obedience to an earthly monarch—obedience to King Jesus. Like the majority of his fellow Baptists, he believed in obedience to the laws of the state and he emphasised that he looked upon it as his duty to behave himself under the king’s government both as becomes a man and a Christian. But Bunyan knew the Spirit of God had given him a gift for preaching, a gift that been confirmed by the congregation of which he was a member. In Bunyan’s own words: “The Holy Ghost never intended that men who have gifts and abilities should bury them in the earth.”⁶ For Bunyan, those imbued with the gifts of the Holy Spirit to preach had no choice but to exercise the gifts that God had given them.

During his trial, Bunyan defended his right to preach by quoting 1 Peter 4:10–11. Those judging his case maintained that only those ordained by the Church of England could lawfully preach. Bunyan’s disagreement was rooted in the fact that for him the ultimate authority in religious matters was not human tradition or human laws, but the Scriptures and their author, God. Bunyan had to obey his God; otherwise he would be counted a traitor to Christ on the day of judgment.

All told, Bunyan spent twelve years in prison. Years after his release, Bunyan recalled his possible demise by hanging as he sat in prison during the 1660s: “Oft I was as if I was on the ladder, with the rope about my neck.”⁷ As his imprisonment wore on year after year, Bunyan sought a deeper meaning for the suffering that he was going through. He eventually came to the conviction that “the church in the fire of persecution is like Esther in the perfuming chamber” (see Esther 2:12–13), being made “fit for the presence of the king.”

THE EXPERIENCE OF WILLIAM MITCHEL (1662-1705)⁸

A good example of this understanding of persecution is Bunyan’s fellow Baptist, William Mitchel, a tireless evangelist in the Pennines, a range of mountains and hills separating North West England from Yorkshire and North East England. Mitchel was born in 1662 at Heptonstall, not far from Hebden Bridge in Yorkshire. Nothing is really known about his upbringing. His conversion came at the age of nineteen after the death of a brother. Although he was genuinely converted, Mitchel played what he later regarded as the part of a Jonah as he sought to go into business as a clothier and become wealthy.

But God frustrated his worldly ambitions and drew him out as a preacher of the gospel. Within four years of his conversion, he began to preach as an itinerant evangelist. His cousin, David Crosley (1669–1744), a stonemason turned preacher, tells us that Mitchel’s aim in his preaching was to “chiefly set forth the exceeding rich and free grace of the gospel, which toward him had been made so exceeding abundant.” At the same time, we are told that his Christian life was one of unwearied diligence in “reading, meditation, and prayer.”

Mitchel would travel with Crosley and others over the Pennines, often during the night so as to reach preaching venues in towns and villages by early morning. Crosley remembered the toil it took to walk “many miles in dark nights and over dismal mountains.” But he also never forgot Mitchel’s “savory and edifying” preaching that took place anywhere Mitchel could get an audience, “on mountains, and in fields and woods.” Though Mitchel was not a polished speaker, crowds would press to hear him. Many merely came out of curiosity, some came to scoff. But later, when their hearts and consciences had been impacted by Mitchel’s gospel preaching, they confessed, “the Lord is with him of a truth.”

According to the Second Conventicle Act (1670) what Mitchel was doing was illegal. This act forbade any one over the age of sixteen from taking part in a religious assembly of more than five people, apart from those sanctioned by the Church of England. The act gave wide powers to local magistrates and judges to “suppress and dissolve” such “unlawful meetings” and arrest whomsoever they saw fit to achieve this end. Mitchel was twice arrested under this law during the reign of James II (r.1685–1688), who succeeded Charles II in 1685. On the first occasion he was treated with deliberate roughness and spent three months in jail at Goodshaw. On the second occasion he was arrested near Bradford and imprisoned for six months in York Castle.

The enemies of the gospel who imprisoned Mitchel might have thought they were shutting him up in a dismal dungeon. To Mitchel, though, as he told his friends in a letter written from York in the spring of 1687, the dungeon was a veritable “paradise, because the glorious presence of God is with me, and the Spirit of glory and of God rests on me” see 1 Peter 4:14. He had been given such a “glorious sight of God’s countenance, and bright splendour of his love,” that he was quite willing to “suffer afflictions with the people of God, and for his glorious Truth.”

In another letter, written to a Daniel Moore during this same imprisonment, Mitchel told him he had heard that James II had issued a Declaration of Indulgence, which pardoned all who had been imprisoned under the penal laws of the Clarendon Code. But he had yet to see it. Whatever the outcome, he told Moore, “the Lord’s will be done, let him order things as may stand with his glory.” This sentence speaks volumes about the frame of mind in which Mitchel had approached his time of imprisonment. He was God’s servant. God would do with him as he sovereignly thought best. And Mitchel was quite content with that, for, in his heart, he longed for his life to reflect above all God’s glory.

THE EXPERIENCE OF ABRAHAM CHEARE (D.1668)²

Abraham Cheare, pastor of the Calvinistic Baptist church at Plymouth, was a native of Plymouth. He had been a fuller, that is, one who cleans and thickens cloth. Unlike many men during the Civil War, he had taken no part in the fighting. He seems to have become a Baptist in 1648 and shortly after became the minister of the Calvinistic Baptist Church there. At the time the Church had 150 members, though there is no knowledge of how long it had existed, or who had pastored it before Cheare.

First imprisoned in 1661 for his Baptist convictions, he was to be in prison for the greater part of the time till his death in 1668. He was first imprisoned for three months in the county jail in Exeter. This jail was described by a contemporary as “a living tomb, a sink of filth, profaneness, and profligacy.” He was set at liberty on Easter that year. On August 24, 1662, he was forced to leave his church by the Act of Uniformity and subsequently re-arrested. He spent the next three years in prison in Exeter until he was released again in August 1665. But when he resumed preaching in Plymouth he was once again arrested and incarcerated on Drake’s Island in Plymouth Sound where he died after some months of illness in 1668. After his death some letters of his were published in a volume over his name, entitled [*Words in Season*](#) (1668).

In the letters he reflected a very clear theology of suffering under persecution and his concern for growth in holiness among his correspondents. In August 1663 he wrote to a friend, recently released from prison, of how important it was “to get the heart established in grace, drawn into a more substantial and experimental communion with Jesus Christ,” and asserted that those who would seek such a deeper experience “may have more advantage from the retirement of a nasty prison, than...from being left to walk in a large place.”

In line with this he had written to another friend in the previous September to answer a question about whether congregations should continue to meet during a time of persecution. Cheare insisted that the question was not whether there were grounds for continuing to meet but whether there could be any justification, having taken reasonable care to avoid arrest, for not meeting. Hence, in July 1664, he could write to a friend who had recently been arrested at a meeting for worship telling him of his “real opportunity to exalt Jesus Christ in suffering for his name’s sake.”

On the other hand, Cheare was fully aware that many people had been deeply disturbed by the onset of persecution, and some had fallen away. In one letter he had a picture of them like a fleet of merchantmen, “who set out of their port beautifully equipped, laden, trimmed, in consortship” but met a storm. Some hastened to their home port “with design to adventure such storms no more”; more were utterly wrecked and castaway; some anchored where they were and wished for the storm to abate. Only a few pressed on to the port for which they had set out in obedience to their Owner’s desires.

Yet in the same letter Cheare, who was not a boastful man, could say of his own case, after more than five years imprisonment:

I have never yet seen the least reason and (I praise Christ my Lord) never been under an hour’s temptation, to relinquish or repent of my testimony in word or deed to any one persecuted truth of Christ for which I suffer.

OUR EXPERIENCE, TODAY

There are countless lessons we can learn from saints long-dead, particularly should our times increasingly approximate theirs. Like Paul speaking of Old Testament Israel to the church at Corinth: “Now these things happened to them as an example, but they were written down for our instruction, on whom the end of the ages has come” (1 Cor. 10:11). He says something similar to the Christians in Rome: “For whatever was written in former days was written for our instruction, that through endurance and through the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope” (Rom. 15:4).

So it is with our 17th-century English Baptist brethren. They were determined to obey God where God had spoken clearly no matter the cost; they recognized that suffering is a means that God uses to sanctify us; they were conscious that no persecutor is ever able to hurt physically any of God's children without divine sovereign permission; and they were aware that suffering for Christ's sake is a means of bringing glory to their great Savior. For all of these reasons, they would have regarded persecution and even martyrdom as a gift to the Church.

May their persevering lives in the midst of persecution and suffering instruct us, as perhaps even now we endure, or are preparing to endure.

[1 Andrew Browning](#), ed., *English Historical Documents 1660–1714* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1953), 375.

[2 Browning](#), ed., *English Historical Documents 1660–1714*, 383.

[3 Browning](#), ed., *English Historical Documents 1660–1714*, 384–385.

[4 Browning](#), ed., *English Historical Documents 1660–1714*, 291.

[5 W.R. Owens](#), ed. *John Bunyan: Grace Abounding to the Chief of Sinners* (Harmondsworth, Middlesex, 1987), 127, n.137.

[6 Grace Abounding to the Chief of Sinners](#) 270.

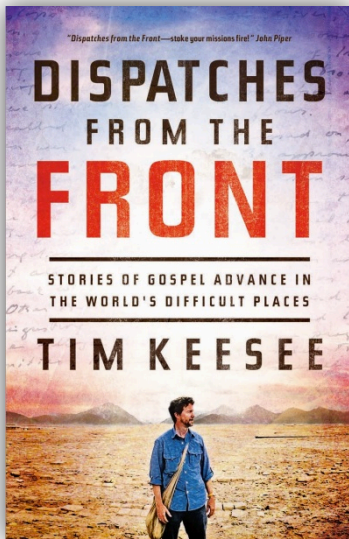
[7 Grace Abounding to the Chief of Sinners](#) 335.

[8 The quotes](#) in this section come from unpublished letters of William Mitchel in the "Mitchel/Crosley Letters in the Papers of Dr William Farrer" (Local Studies Unit Archives, Manchester Central Library, Manchester, UK).

[9 On Cheare](#), see Brian L. Hanson with Michael A.G. Haykin, *Waiting on the Spirit of Promise: The Life and Theology of Suffering of Abraham Cheare* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2014). The quotes below come from this book.

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BOOK REVIEW:

Dispatches from the Front

Reviewed by Alex Duke

Tim Keese. [Dispatches from the Front: Stories of Gospel Advance in the World's Difficult Places](#). Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 240 pps. \$14.99.

All around us, it seems, the sky is falling. [America](#). [Australia](#). The UK. Church attendance is down, cultural compasses are pointing east of Eden, and many so-called “Christian” veneers are vanishing. Once-nominal Christians are now comfortably non-Christian, while many once-amicable non-Christians are now comfortably anti-Christian.

There are many ways we can respond to this. First, we can (and should) understand this news rightly, realizing that in every yarn of destruction there are threads of promise. Lord willing, the articles linked above and below are exercises in that. The sky isn't falling, and as Christians we know it never will. Instead, we wait for the sky to open, our eyes straining for that white horse, whose rider is called Faithful and True.

Second, we can (and should) look to history for encouragement, understanding that the church has seen such presumably dire straits before—and carried on with Christ as her architect. We've done that, too— both [here](#) and [here](#).

Third, we can (and should) [commit ourselves to prayer](#), both corporately and individually.

But that's not all. We should also look to the *present* for encouragement. We should take time to learn that the church, around the world and in the unlikeliest of places, is far from vanishing; instead, as people are being called out of darkness and into the marvelous light of God, it's shining brighter and brighter and brighter and brighter.

A JOYOUS EDUCATION

This is the kind of joyous education one receives while reading Tim Keese's beautiful, affecting, and poignant *Dispatches from the Front: Stories of Gospel Advance in the World's Difficult Places*. The book is a collection of journal entries, written across several years and bookended by what appears to be an occasional prologue and epilogue.

Because of this, it's somewhat difficult to subject Keese's work to a standard "review." He doesn't give the reader arguments to parse or specific exhortations to either heed or reject. Instead, his message is a simple one: From the Balkans to the former Soviet Republic; from China to the Horn of Africa; from Liberia, Sierra Leone, and Guinea to Bangladesh, India, and Pakistan; from Southeast Asia to Afghanistan and Iraq—God is sovereignly and graciously saving people through the proclamation of the gospel. What's more, Keese recalls story after story where these now-saved men and women are being taught to love the Word and join with other Christians in local churches for mutual encouragement, holiness, submission, and service. He tells story after story where the spiritual discipline of evangelism isn't for super-Christians in super-churches, and where discipling relationships are part and parcel of "normal Christianity" (98).

Who wants to quibble with that?

A FEW TAKEAWAYS

That said, I do want to provide a pair cruising-altitude takeaways, and then move on to the book's immediate usefulness.

First, Keese's narration is hopeful, even assured, without sounding naïve or simplistic. We've all read well-meaning, evangelistically zealous books or missions reports that celebrate x-amount of baptisms (usually high) in y-amount of time (usually short) that resulted in z-amount of churches planted (usually a high number, in a short amount of time). *Dispatches* avoids this misleading temptation, making clear that the metric of faithfulness far supersedes one of reported (and hoped for!) fruitfulness.

Second, Keese is exemplary without being exclusionary. Let me explain. The topics of missions in general or "frontier missions" in particular are sometimes discussed at the expense of Christians outside the missionary fold. Because of this, exhortations to consider global lostness or get involved with God's work among the nations occasionally trend toward an unwitting exclusion of all but those who were already considering giving their lives to missions in the first place. Meanwhile, those who are "giving their lives" to accountancy or construction or military service or hedge fund management are left wondering if participating in the greatness of the Great Commission requires a recently-stamped passport. Perhaps this is avoided simply by *Dispatches'* narrative approach—the "audience," as it were, is only God and Keese himself. Nonetheless, I am certain this book will be useful, applicable, and compelling for all Christians in every walk of life.

NEW WORLDS, NEW PRAYERS

But exactly *how* was this stranger's journal about places I'll never go and people I'll never meet useful, applicable, and compelling? In short, it helped me pray. Perhaps more specifically, as Keese wrote and reflected on his life, he introduced me to worlds and people and cultures I never knew existed, describing them with such honest and

earnest vividness that I was compelled to pray beyond my usual string of vague, pre-packaged prayers for the lost around the world.

For example, I learned to pray for:

- The 6 million Tatar Muslims who, as of now, have no entire Bibles or gospel tracts in their native language (32)—*Lord, bring the Word in words they understand.*
- Pastor Huseyn in Azerbaijan who is experiencing intensifying persecution as he ministers to “mentally disabled children who live in horrific state institutions . . . and have no category for the kind of love these Christians are showing them week after week, month after month” (47)—*Father, save many children and hospital staff through your people’s category-shifting love.*
- Astrit and Vjollca, a married couple in Albania whose Christ-centered marriage grates against their surrounding misogynistic culture in which “a man can beat or rape his wife, and it’s considered normal” (64)—*God, please protect these wounded women from evil men; send godly men like Astrit there to protect and lead women like Vjollca toward flourishing; judge those who persist in such reprehensible sin.*
- Shiite gypsies who live in “tents and shacks along the Buna River, amid a dump that is bordered by an open sewer. . . . [They] are scorned, hated, and dismissed as dirty beggars and thieves” (74)—*Lord, as the Christians there love the “unloveable,” I pray that you would save many.*
- Those in Lanzhou, China fooled by Taoist deceit, which “combines the most ancient Chinese superstitions into one miserable dungeon of the damned” (89)—*Father, by the power of the Holy Spirit, please open blind eyes.*
- The many house churches in Mongolia (96)—*Lord, we pray that you would make these house churches healthy and faithful and fruitful, that they would clearly reflect God’s character to a watching world.*
- Churches in Koh Kong, Cambodia that are surrounded by red-light houses “notorious for child prostitutes and trafficking in young girls . . . [where] girls become the prey of pedophiles because their parents need the money to feed hungry mouths at home . . . [where] life is cheaper than a meal” (106)—*Lord, come quickly; save these precious, image-bearing girls; judge these image-marring murderers.*
- The Hindus in Serampore, where William Carey once ministered and started a college that has since departed from the faith. Keesee writes, “But Carey’s monuments aren’t made of bricks or marble, but rather something so much bigger. He gave India the Bible. In fact, he gave this polyglot people with its tangle of tongues several Bibles. . . . *This is Carey’s living legacy*” (139)—*Father, in this land of false gods, all of whom are as blind and deaf as their worshippers, reveal yourself as the one true God who opens hearts to believe.*
- The “Malawu miracle,” where God providentially prepared many to receive the gospel, even though their town was founded by a witch, dedicated to demonic spirit worship, and designated as a “gate to hell” where animals and humans were routinely sacrificed. Now, though, this place of “unspeakable evil and violent darkness . . . has turned from darkness to light” and a “church building now stands on ground once dedicated to Satan” (167-168)—*Thank you, Lord! May these men and women grow in the grace and knowledge of our Savior Jesus Christ. To him be the glory both now and forever.*

Read this book if for no other reason than it puts flesh and bone on our prayers as it illustrates the faithfulness of God in keeping his promises. Promises like the one in John 10 where Jesus says, “I have other sheep that are not of this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice. So there will be one flock, one shepherd.”

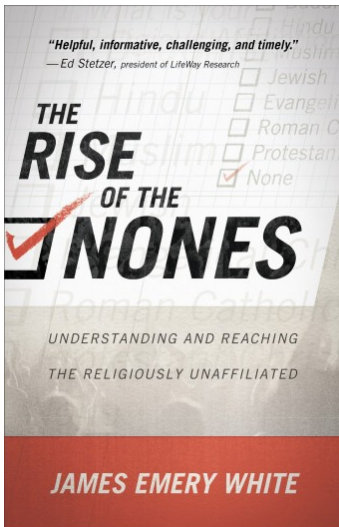
I met many of these sheep while reading *Dispatches from the Front*. They are beautiful sheep and, this side of heaven, all I can do is pray for them. Once I’m in heaven, though, assuming it works this way, I hope to find one or two and thank them for their testimonies of perseverance, for their confidence in Christ’s church and its victory, for their tight-fisted faith in the Good Shepherd who was slain for his sheep. Together, we will sing:

Worthy is the Lamb who was slain, to receive power and wealth and wisdom and might and honor and glory and blessing!

And from every tongue and tribe and people and nation, all God's people said . . . *Amen*.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

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BOOK REVIEW:

The Rise of the Nones

Reviewed by Derek Rishmawy

James Emery White, [*The Rise of the Nones: Understanding and Reaching the Religiously Unaffiliated*](#). Baker Books, 2014, 224 pages. \$15.99.

Let's begin with a boring statistic: 8.1 percent. According to an American Religious Identification survey, that's roughly how many Americans in 1990 were willing to identify themselves as having "no religious identification." Fast-forward eighteen years to 2008 and that same ARIS study number becomes 15 percent. Give it four more years in the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life's 2012 study it becomes 19.3 percent. That's one in five Americans. In other words, in a space of about 20 years, the number of Americans willing to claim no religious identity has doubled and there is no indication that trend is slowing down. This is the fastest-growing religious demographic in America. The statistics aren't as boring anymore, now are they?

Apparently, "Nones" are on the rise. As the body commissioned to preach the gospel to and disciple all nations, the question becomes, "What is the church going to do about it?"

In *The Rise of the Nones: Understanding and Reaching the Religiously Unaffiliated* James Emery White steps in to provide an answer, or rather, a vision for the American church to reach those Nones with the gospel of Christ. As the former president of Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary and the founding pastor of Mecklenberg Community Church—one of the fastest growing churches in the nation—he seems particularly qualified for the task.

With a clear, engaging style, vivid illustrations, biblical roots, and a proper sense of history, White lays out a clear path for churches to make the changes necessary to deal with the shifting religious sands. The book breaks down into two parts. In the first, White tells us who the Nones are, and in the second, he lays out a plan to reach them.

WHO ARE THE NONES?

How good of an archer would you be if you didn't know how to recognize a target? You might shoot with enthusiasm, strength, and joy, but if you don't know what to aim at, odds are you're not likely to hit anything—at least not anything you're supposed to. Many churches today are like archers who can't recognize the target. They want to reach the Nones for Christ, but they don't really know what they look like, so their aim is off.

In the first (and *very* helpful) part of the book, White strives to paint a portrait of the Nones for us. Actually, strike that. It's more like a portrait as well as the broad landscape in which these strange new figures make sense. First, we get a barrage of statistics establishing the rise of the Nones; this is not a passing fad, nor can we simply assure ourselves it's just Millennials taking their time coming back home because they're putting off having kids for a bit. They're not.

So what do they look like? Well, they're not hostile atheists, but rather apatheists who are ambivalent about religion (26-27). White says many of them are not opposed to the idea of God in general, but are turned off by a church full of lawyers (power), guns (politics), and money (money). Nones are the product of a secularized, privatized, and pluralized post-Christian world in which many think they've heard and rejected the gospel, but most, in fact, don't even have the basic theological furniture in place to make a decision about it (90-91). Infected with "bad religion," they don't believe they're sinners, but "mistakers." They don't look for solid arguments, but statements that have a feel of "truthiness," and "wiktiality"—truthiness approved of by popular majority opinion (63).

This is why the old methods simply won't work. A revival with a simple gospel message won't likely be understood (or attended). If you build it, they won't come because they're not looking for it or attracted by it.

DECIDING TO REACH THEM

So, how do we reach them? White says the most important shift comes when we determine to *try*. White says the problem is that our churches are focused on the wrong sort of growth. Instead of seeking the more difficult *conversion growth* that pulls in Nones and non-believers, we're busy with *biological growth* (having babies), *prodigal growth* (reeling people back in), or *transfer growth* (taking members from other churches) (74) As a result, all of our programs, preaching, and care go into maintenance mode or catering to these other kinds of growth.

Only when we understand and prioritize conversion growth will we make the sacrificial changes necessary to bring them in. To return to our earlier metaphor, now that we know what the target looks like, we need to actually become "none-targeted" (96) and decide to shoot for it.

MARKS OF NONE-TARGETED CHURCHES

So what are some of the marks of churches that reach Nones? For one thing, we need to move past the "if you build it they will come" mentality (88). Nones might like coffee, but they *respond* to a cause like poverty reduction (100), and they'll come check out a community that invites them into one. For Nones it's Cause → Community → Christ in order of interest. Still, when they do come, they need to experience grace *and* truth or, rather, the uniquely powerful truth of grace (121) that sets apart the message of the gospel from all other systems.

Preaching and teaching is still center-stage and it can't be dumbed-down, even if we need to put a high premium on "translation." We must endeavor to connect to and invert hostile cultural narratives and habits of mind as well as refocus our apologetics less on older, evidential approaches to the moral objections Nones tend to have towards the Bible. This can only happen, though, if there is a community that embodies this and has space for those in process, a community that puts a premium on the lived unity of the body instead of the sort of Christian infighting that turns Nones off (142, 145).

Finally, in a more practical, some might say pragmatic chapter, White says you need to open "the front door." In other words, pay attention to the church itself and the weekend gathering. Cultivate a friendly, open atmosphere (153). Clean up the pews and keep things tidy; how you keep the church building demonstrates the reverence you have for the Lord (159). Music isn't everything, but excellence matters, and like the old Reformers, we shouldn't be scared of mixing it up a bit (157). Develop a solid children's ministry; people might find your preaching a bit wanting, but if their kids love the children's ministry, they'll stick around (155).

CONCERNS AND COMMENDATIONS

Though I found myself largely nodding my head in agreement through the book, I did have a couple of questions. Though most of the pragmatic moves White mentions are either harmless or mostly helpful, I still wondered at a couple of points: "While that's probably good for getting people in, what about what happens to them as they stay?" Yes, they come with consumer concerns, but should their continued experience reinforce those concerns? Comfy stadium seating might say you're expecting company (160), but how does that affect the long-term formative experience of worship? We want to bring in and convert Nones, yes, but how do these changes affect our long-term discipleship?

As for keeping the main thing the main thing and avoiding unnecessary conflict, I'm all for it. But what about when the doctrinal distinctives come up? White appeals to John 13-17 about the primary unity in the New Testament being "relational unity" (145), as opposed to absolute uniformity or unanimity. Yet Paul talks about the unity of believers resting in one Lord, one faith, one baptism ([Eph. 4](#)); in other words, there's a unity of confession, of theology. So what happens when you can't agree about baptism? In that same vein, I'm sure White has an answer, but I would have liked to see him touch on the way a church with strong membership practices should approach the "Cause -> Community -> Christ" paradigm. And further, how does this approach handle the bleeding off of millennial evangelicals into other "older" traditions, away from the lowest, common denominator evangelicalism they grew up with?

Questions aside, as a young adult ministry director, I can safely say this book provides a timely word. We cannot bury our head in the sands on this issue. Based on the millennials I come across, White's analysis of the Nones seems spot on. Indeed, a decision to engage the Nones will essentially be a decision to engage millennials as well.

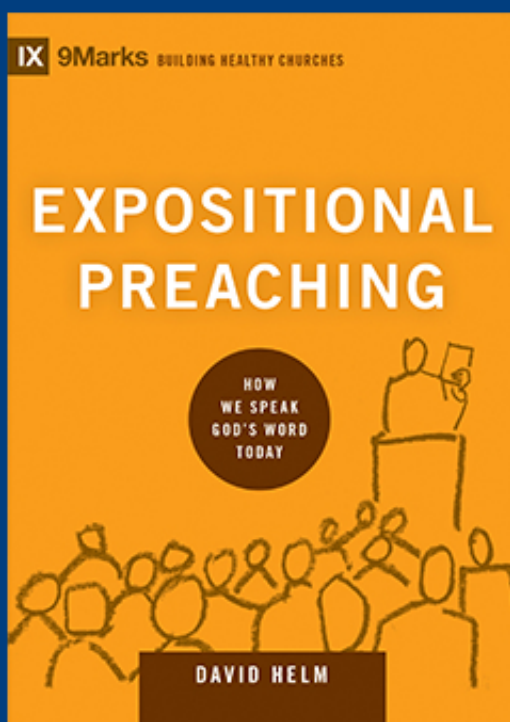
In *The Rise of the Nones*, White has done more than ring an alarmist bell. He's given us a clear resource to understand and respond to the challenge ahead. While I would caution pastors not to fret about older pews, or whether the organist should start showing up in skinny jeans, this book will help you share the timeless gospel to those who do.

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Derek Rishmawy is the director of college and young adult ministries at Trinity United Presbyterian Church in Orange County, California. He blogs at Reformedish and Christ and Pop Culture. You can follow him on Twitter at [@DZRishmawy](#).

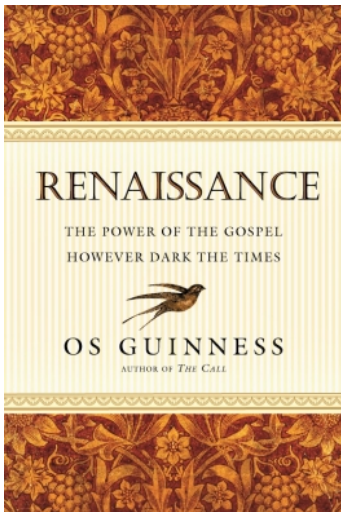
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BOOK REVIEW:

Renaissance

Reviewed by Zach Schlegel

Os Guinness, [*Renaissance: The Power of the Gospel However Dark the Times*](#). IVP Books, 2014. 192 pp. \$16.00.

Jesus once told his disciples, “If you were of the world, the world would love you as its own; but because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, therefore the world hates you.” In an increasingly secularized West, we have yet to see all the ways in which followers of Christ will be “hated.” The changing political and cultural landscape has removed any incentive for being a nominal Christian (a good thing). However, it has also diminished influence Christians have within culture and led to more opposition to Christianity (not a good thing). It’s not easy to participate in the civic discourse when you’re regarded as a bigot for agreeing with Jesus.

So, how should Christians respond?

There is hope, Os Guinness says, and this hope encourages Christians to roll up their sleeves and to act. His book *Renaissance: The Power of the Gospel However Dark the Times* introduces the reader to some of the church’s current challenges and how we got here, and then establishes a few building blocks for moving forward.

FROM BAD TO WORSE

As its subtitle evinces, this book is about the power of the gospel however dark the times. That said, Guinness knows the Western church throughout history has proven susceptible to secularization, corruption, and division (115). He writes, “There is no perfect Christian culture, so there is no golden age behind us. Our golden age lies ahead—when, and only when, our Lord returns” (122).

RAISING DRY BONES

But knowing our golden age lies ahead doesn't mean we give up and rest on our albeit future laurels. In chapter one, Guinness looks at our current situation and compares it to St. Augustine. Augustine, who lived through the decline and sack of Rome by the Visigoths, trusted God, lived faithfully, and laid out a vision for future generations.

In this, he is a model for us, and Guinness sees today as "our Augustinian moment." With this in mind, he lays out three factors that will shape the world to come: globalization (chapter 2), whether the worldwide Christian church will demonstrate a faith that escapes cultural captivity (chapters 3 & 4), and the all-decisive factor that God is sovereign (chapters 5 & 6).

Guinness' concern is not for a Christian civilization but for Christianity itself, mainly in the West (18). The power of Christianity to influence culture rests in its practice of truth, its ability to faithfully and fruitfully live out the gospel. To that end, Guinness is convinced that a critical mass of believers living out the ideas found in God's Word has the power to influence the surrounding culture (75). One need only look back to a history spotted with such influence—a history filled with Christians giving themselves to efforts like philanthropy, reform movements (abolishing slavery, fighting for religious freedom, reforming prisons, resisting the evils of Nazism, freeing prisoners of sex trafficking), the founding of universities, and championing for human dignity (69). Christians have been and should continue to be known by such world-defying commitments. After all, the greatest danger for the church is the world, for when it becomes like the world, it loses its voice, its power, its saltiness.

WHY CHRISTIANITY?

But what sets Christianity apart from other ideologies and religions? Why can Christians have hope amid such challenges? One answer is that Christians can learn and grow. Consider how English sociologist David Martin contrasted Christianity and Marxism. Martin writes, "It is a paradox that a system which claimed that the beginning of all criticism was the criticism of religion should have ended up with a form of religion which was the end of criticism." Marxism, in other words, had no resources within itself for correcting itself. Christianity, on the other hand, possesses a doctrine of its own failure, which in turn serves as the source of ongoing self-criticism and renewal (79). Where the church has erred she has the means, by God's grace, to repent and once again live out the truths of the gospel.

HOW DOES RENEWAL HAPPEN?

In chapter five, Guinness takes a brief tour of recent scholarship on how to "change the world." These ideas are worth paying attention to, but ultimate change, Guinness argues, will come not by man's infallible plans and vision statements but as a by-product of godly living. In other words, as individual Christians live out the Christian life in their respective spheres (parent, engineer, artist, teacher, etc.), God picks up each life as a different color of paint. By itself, each life may seem mere, but in the hands of a sovereign God, each color is another shade of a masterpiece. One thinks of the Preacher's words in Ecclesiastes: "He has made everything beautiful in its time."

So, is there hope for a Christian renaissance or renewal in the West? Yes! With appropriate humility, Guinness looks back to the example of Ezekiel 37. There, the prophet stood before a pile of dry bones. When the Lord asked the prophet, "Can these bones live?" Ezekiel can only answer, "O Lord GOD, You know." God made the bones come to life. Why? Because God can. This must be our posture to the question of renewal. We know God can but he owes us nothing, so we must answer, "O Lord, You know." Guinness wisely concludes, "We wait for God's answer, but as we wait, we work" (148).

This, I think, is where Guinness is at his best in the book. The decline of the church in the West calls for a hope-filled and humble response. We should neither despairingly throw in the towel (God is sovereign) nor assume we are the ones

writing history. For the church to have hope moving forward, we are called to “define our faith, our lives, and all we are . . . by the standard of Jesus Christ our Lord, the precepts of the good news of the kingdom, and the authority of the Holy Scriptures” (135).

CONCLUSION

For those who pick up the book, let me end with two cautions and a commendation.

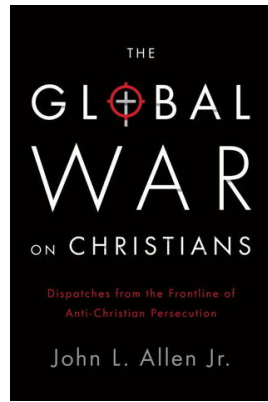
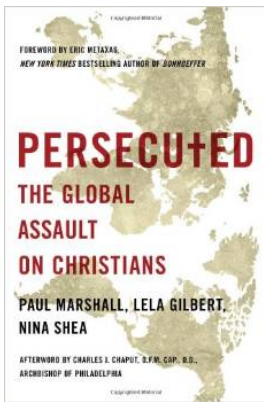
First, Guinness talks of the church and the individual Christian interchangeably throughout the book. This may sound like a minor semantic issue, but it has important implications. As you read through the New Testament, there are times the individual is addressed (“Husbands, love your wives”) and times the church as a whole is addressed (“In humility count others more significant”). To flatten that distinction blurs things—not everyone should be an engineer or artist or pastor. If we take what the Bible instructs individuals to do and apply it to the church indiscriminately, we risk losing the unique calling and authority of the church.

Second, I have concern about the way the Roman Catholic Church is discussed. Guinness rightly affirms the necessity of the reformation and definition of the gospel (160). But when he asks if Pope Francis will “restore the church’s humility, so that such vast institutional power will prove the true servant of the gospel” (129), I think he brings more overlap between Rome and evangelicalism than is there. No doubt, we can agree and partner with our Catholic friends on what the Bible says regarding a number of social ills. But we must not lose sight of the fact that the Catholic Church, in their official teachings, disagrees with Protestants on the most important issue: the gospel.

Guinness has sounded a clarion call to be more than just hearers of God’s word. The reader is left to do the hard work of mining the Scriptures and prayerfully figuring out the countless ways to apply God’s word in their job, family life, ministry— in every area of life. We need not isolate ourselves in a Christian bubble nor hand over the language of social action to liberals. The world is filled with ills that call for thoughtful biblical responses and action. The Christian is not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation. So we labor in every area of life to be faithful, and leave the results to God.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

Zach Schlegel is an Assistant Pastor at Capitol Hill Baptist Church in Washington, D. C.



BOOK(S) REVIEW:

Persecuted & The Global War on Christians

Reviewed by Greg Cochran

Paul Marshall, Lela Gilbert, and Nina Shea, [*Persecuted: The Global Assault on Christians*](#). Thomas Nelson, 2013. 416 pps. \$16.99.

John Allen, [*The Global War on Christians: Dispatches from the Front Lines of Anti-Christian Persecution*](#). Image Books, 2013. 320 pps. \$25.00.

Recently, two books have been published detailing the plight of Christians suffering persecution around the world. In many ways, these books can be viewed as complementary works, the strength of one augmenting the potential weakness of the other (and vice versa). Taken together, they offer a global panorama on the state of Christian suffering.

Juxtaposing these books from three different perspectives will demonstrate how, together, they paint an accurate picture of Christian persecution. First, consider the different organizational structures. Marshall, Gilbert, and Shea's volume, *Persecuted: The Global Assault on Christians*, arranges the world scene by ideology, rather than by geography. In other words, countries are categorized by their overarching ideological narrative. So, rather than speaking about "persecution in north Africa or in the Middle East," *Persecuted* divides the world into categories like "Communist," "post-Communist," and "Muslim." Thus, the reader finds geographically separated nations like Iraq, Nigeria, Bangladesh, and Indonesia all grouped under the single heading: "The Muslim World: War and Terrorism."

Alternately, John Allen's *The Global War on Christians*, spends half of its pages strictly describing persecution from a geographical perspective. Sections covered include Africa, Asia, Latin America, the Middle East, and Eastern Europe. If the reader puts these two pictures side-by-side, he will gain a clear knowledge of the kind of persecution happening in

any given region of the world, while also possessing a realistic understanding of why such persecution is taking place. The two books complement each other.

A second way to see this complementary relation is to contrast the analytical outlook of Marshall, Gilbert, and Shea's *Persecuted* with the journalistic outlook of Allen's *Global War*. For Allen, the global war on Christians is happening in real-time human stories. As the Vatican analyst for CNN and a senior correspondent for the *National Catholic Reporter*, Allen is remarkably familiar with particular stories from countries around the world. Marshall, Gilbert, and Shea, on the other hand, are interested in hard data and the political motives driving the trends toward persecution.

One can see these distinctions by simply contrasting the manner in which each book covers Vietnam. *The Global War* places Vietnam under the heading of "Asia," while *Persecuted* arranges it under the heading of "Caesar and God: The Remaining Communist Powers."

Allen's concern is to highlight people who have suffered for faith in Vietnam. So, after briefly noting that Christians make up 8 percent of Vietnam's population, he continues to tell the story of Pierre Nguyen Dinh Cuong, a young Roman Catholic who was kidnapped on Christmas Eve 2011. His case was mentioned as an example of 16 or so abductions of Christians in Vietnam that year. After telling the story of Cuong's abduction, Allen proceeds to tell the story of a village in Nghe An, a Vietnamese province which appears to be the target of "religious cleansing." A priest in the area who attempted to complete the mass despite being threatened by his adversaries, was summarily beaten and sent to the hospital with a fractured skull and other injuries.

When Marshall, Gilbert, and Shea cover Vietnam, they also share numerous stories of persecution, such as the stories of Father Ly and the house church network in Hanoi. The stories, however, are again included within the larger political framework. Thus, the authors devote extra pages to explaining the history of Vietnam and the relationship the government has held toward Christian churches. In addition, their book details the plight of various Christian minorities in Vietnam, citing credible sources like the U. S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF).

Finally, the third manner in which the two books differ with and yet complement each other is in their respective appeals for action. On this issue, Allen's is the more notable volume. To its credit, the Marshall, Gilbert, and Shea volume has an entire chapter devoted to answering the question, "So what do we do now?" Unsurprisingly, though, the response to the question is primarily political, keeping issues of religious liberty at the forefront of policy debates.

Allen's book, however, provides a more demonstrably Christian response. His concern is for prayer, intercession, and Christian action. Allen shares an example of a physician from South Carolina, who, after being confronted with the plight of persecuted Christians in India, began a ministry that buys chickens and goats for widows whose husbands died as a result of anti-Christian violence. Again, viewing these two books as complementary provides Christians with the full scope of action possible on behalf of the persecuted church.

In short, if the reader is seeking after reliable numbers and broader political trends, he ought to choose the Marshall, Gilbert, and Shea volume. If the reader is seeking understanding with the idea of putting such knowledge to action, then the Allen volume might prove more helpful. Of course, reading both volumes together provides the greatest breadth of accessible knowledge available on the state of the persecuted church around the world.

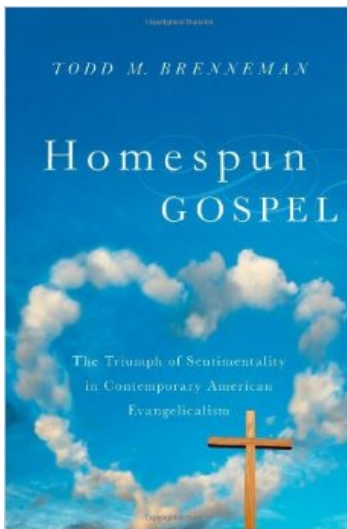
One final note seems in order in reviewing these two volumes. Each is written from a Roman Catholic perspective, and each includes those beyond the Roman Catholic tradition. So one is left to wonder: why aren't evangelical, Reformed scholars publishing credible accounts of persecution for the suffering body around the world? We should be thankful that these two volumes have appeared, but we also ought to be motivated to see an increase in scholarship in this important area.

If we are serious about making disciples of all nations, then we might also need to be equally serious about the implications of such an endeavor: not all tribes and nations are amenable to the gospel. Many will actively—perhaps

violently—oppose it. Books like the two reviewed here will help keep Christians aware of the persecution being suffered in the wake of gospel discipleship; at the same time, it's clear there is certainly room for more works like these from the Protestant, Reformed tradition.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

Greg Cochran is the Director of the Bachelor of Applied Theology program at California Baptist University in Riverside, California.



BOOK REVIEW:

Homespun Gospel

Reviewed by Matt McCullough

Todd Brenneman, [*Homespun Gospel: The Triumph of Sentimentality in Contemporary American Evangelicalism*](#). Oxford University Press, 2013. 208 pps, \$27.95.

For a 160-page book focused on the writings of just three popular pastors, Todd Brenneman's *Homespun Gospel* is remarkably ambitious. Brenneman wants to redefine how we understand modern American evangelicalism.

To this point, the most influential definitions of evangelicalism—like those of David Bebbington and George Marsden—have zeroed in on the content of evangelical belief or doctrine. And to this point much scholarly attention to evangelicalism has focused on the activity of evangelicals in politics.

But Brenneman believes that at the core of the movement—influencing both evangelical belief and evangelical activism—is an aesthetic marked by what he calls “sentimentality.” Viewed in this light, the evangelical lineage is as easily traced from Peale to Osteen as from Ockenga to Piper. Is Brenneman onto something?

THE ARGUMENT IN A NUTSHELL

First let me explain what the author means by sentimentality, then sketch out how he believes it functions in American evangelicalism.

He uses sentimentality to describe a kind of emotion or way of feeling. Within evangelicalism, it refers to feelings of love inspired by three main images: God as (doting) Father, humans as helpless but adored children, and the nostalgic home

of a blissful nuclear family. According to Brenneman, “these three metaphors pervade evangelicalism and form the basis for the sentimental appeal” (6).

Though this sentimentality definitely doesn’t come off well in Brenneman’s account, he insists we shouldn’t take it as a pejorative term. It is an effective style of persuasion in its own right, and a powerful way of engaging with the world. The goal of the book is to reveal the power of this pervasive but overlooked feature in evangelical rhetoric.

To show how the “sentimental appeal” works, Brenneman chose to focus on three best-selling mega-church pastors from three different branches of the evangelical tree. The central figure is Max Lucado, Church of Christ pastor and bestselling author who was the subject of Brenneman’s dissertation. Then there’s church-growth strategist turned spiritual-life guru Rick Warren. And finally, there’s Joel Osteen, America’s big-smiling, stadium-filling, prosperity-promising pastor-at-large.

The first chapter introduces the images at the heart of evangelical sentimentality. Brenneman argues that these pastor-authors appeal to God-as-adoptive-Father to make individual Christians feel better about themselves. God is the type of Father who puts your drawings on his fridge and never misses a ball game. All the resources of his power and knowledge are aimed at meeting the smallest needs and solving the smallest problems of his helpless children. In summary, Brenneman writes, “The biblical symbol of adoption serves as a foundation for emotional exploitation in contemporary evangelicalism” (36).

In his second chapter, Brenneman illustrates how sentimentality replaces careful intellectual engagement with critical issues. That is to say, sustaining the power of sentimentality means avoiding doctrinal discussions that could be divisive. But Brenneman also argues sentimentality insulates evangelicalism from intellectual challenges like those associated with evolution. It cultivates a different way of knowing where, “Purveyors position the emotions as being more reliable than the intellect and as a trust worthier source of truth” (53).

The third and fourth chapters suggest how sentimentality—ostensibly at home in the private world of individual feeling—confers authority and influence in the public world of economics and politics.

Brenneman’s distaste for his subjects and their methods comes through most clearly in these chapters, and his argument would be stronger without so many undeveloped claims as to the “real” motives of these pastors (e.g., 109-11, 126, 129). But underneath it all, the book’s basic claims are sound. Sentimentality sells. That holds true from popular Christian music to evangelical children’s literature to the complex of “Jesus junk”—my words, not his—surrounding the best-selling books of these pastors.

And in the world of politics, Brenneman argues, the power of sentimentality helps explain why evangelicals have rallied to issues surrounding children (abortion) and the home (marriage). The irony, he claims, is that the focus on individuals and their needs may end up undermining any evangelical attempt to transform society, since their leaders are more comfortable appealing to individual emotions than speaking truth to power.

WHAT DO WE DO WITH SENTIMENTALITY?

At the end of the day, though, as an account of modern evangelicalism, this book is unconvincing. Brenneman’s brush is just too broad.

There’s no doubting Lucado, Warren, and Osteen have a wide-ranging influence. But there is a large and growing segment of evangelicalism in which these figures and their marketing empires are more often the butt of bad jokes than taken very seriously. Their books aren’t read. Their methods aren’t followed. Their rhetorical style comes off kitschy and foreign.

Folks in my corner of the evangelical world don't want to be defined in their light, and there's room for fair criticism of Brenneman's book on this front. He does acknowledge a counterculture—in particular the signers of the Evangelical Manifesto (144ff). But I believe he underestimates how large this segment is.

That said, I don't know any evangelicals for whom the fatherhood of God or promise of adoption aren't central themes. I don't know any who aren't interested in helping people connect with God's loving, providential care for their individual lives. And I think we're at our best when we're trying to get the hearts of our people engaged with the doctrines that fill our heads. By Brenneman's definition, that makes us sentimental. Should we be okay with that? Is sentimentality a problem?

To answer that question, I think we need a far more nuanced understanding of sentimentality and its role than this book provides. Brenneman's study is a starting point. We should take it as a call to greater self-awareness and an opportunity to think carefully about what we're doing when we aim for the heart. In what follows I want to present at least a few qualifications toward a healthy use of sentimentality.

Sentimentality isn't necessarily new. In Brenneman's account, any celebration of God's fatherly care is treated as innovative and merely therapeutic. He believes this sort of sentimental appeal “has integrally changed evangelicalism from the nineteenth century to the present” (159).

I'm not disputing that emotional engagement with the fatherhood of God is central to evangelicalism. I'm not disputing that some of the language used these days can be over the top. But I don't believe the emphasis itself is uniquely modern. I'd say it's basic to Christianity.

Granted, the Scriptures don't promise that God has my birthday circled on his calendar. But there's certainly an “appeal to tender feelings” (5) in Hosea's image of God teaching Israel to walk, holding them up by their hands, bending over to feed them ([Hos. 11:1-4](#)). And isn't there a tad of nostalgia when Jesus longs to gather Jerusalem “as a hen gathers her brood under her wings” ([Luke 13:34](#))? Brenneman may be right to suggest Paul's language of fatherhood was influenced more by the Greco-Roman *pater familias* than by the romanticism of the 19th century (6). But Paul's cry of “Abba! Father!” and his talk of the spirit of adoption leads straight into the promise that all things—even the mundane things—work together for the good of his children and that nothing can separate them from his love ([Rom. 8:14-15, 28-39](#)).

Sentimentality isn't necessarily narcissistic. There is certainly a man-centered way to talk about God. And without question, narcissism remains a prominent problem in American evangelicalism. But it seems to me that Brenneman projects Osteen's prosperity teaching onto anyone who celebrates God's providential care for individuals (e.g., pp. 30-31). I agree we ought to be careful in *how* we tell people God loves them, but not more careful than Jesus.

When Jesus told followers they were more important than many sparrows, or that even their hairs were numbered by God ([Matt. 10:29-31](#)), he was drawing on the power of sentiment as Brenneman defines it. But he wasn't fostering narcissism. He was glorifying the grace of God. He was drawing from one of the Bible's consistent themes: the beauty of God's love shows up in the particularity of his care for us, not because of how awesome we are but because of how gracious he is.

Sentimentality isn't necessarily anti-intellectual. I agree with much of what Brenneman claims about the way sentimentality is used to avoid careful theological discourse. But he often assumes a dichotomy between emotional engagement via sentimentality and intellectual engagement (e.g., 31). It's either constructive, apologetic theology or emotional obfuscation and exploitation. I believe Brenneman's account misses a nuance at the heart of evangelicalism, one also rooted in the Scriptures. The goal of all Christian intellectual labor is worship. Doctrine and doxology go together. Doctrine is meant to inspire feelings of love, peace, gratitude and joy, and it's emotional engagement that brings doctrine to life. We're always aiming to make ideas sensible; this is the way to doxology. And sentimentality has a role to play.

But . . . sentimentality is dangerous. Perhaps the most useful takeaway from this book is its reminder that sentimentality is a rhetorical device of remarkable and often unrecognized power. Its power can be used for good. It can help us taste the sweetness of God's truth. It can help revealed ideas come to life.

But if our appeal to sentiment is not clearly tied to truth, it will still be powerful and then it becomes dangerous. Brennenman's book offers critical insight into how emotional experience can become the sole verification of authenticity and truth. If we aren't careful, as pastors, we can all too easily build our people on a substitute foundation that won't survive the shifting sands of what feels right.

We also can't afford to underestimate the power of sentimental appeal in our preaching. It will usually be effective. It isn't that difficult to move people, and it always feels good. But if not clearly tied to the point of the text, the power of this sort of appeal is a distracting power, an obfuscating and manipulating power. It's a power that may draw us flattering attention as effective preachers—which is to say its power can be deadly.

God help us check our own hearts every time we aim at someone else's.

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