

PERMANENT  
*Things*

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# PERMANENT *Things*

TABLE OF CONTENTS | ISSUE 1.1 | 2019

---

- 3** EDITOR'S NOTE: THE FIRST THINGS OF PERMANENT THINGS  
by Owen Strachan
- 4** LEONARDO DAVINCI, JAMES CAMERON, AND TRANS-SPECIES "LOVE": THE BRAVE NEW VISION OF POSTHUMANISM  
by Michael Plato
- 13** 'WHAT YOU'RE ABOUT TO WITNESS IS NOT MAGIC': CHRISTOPHER NOLAN'S CINEMA OF IMMANENT WONDER  
by Brett McCracken
- 18** "THE SPIRIT DOES NOT MINISTER ANYTHING ELSE BUT CHRIST": KEVIN VANHOOZER ON PASTOR-THEOLOGIAN, DOCTRINE, AND CULTURAL LITERACY
- 23** ON HAVING A LARGE FAMILY IN AN AGE OF CHILDLESSNESS  
by David Talcott
- 25** GOD'S CALL TO EXCELLENCE  
by Andreas J. Köstenberger
- 29** TRUTH WITH GRACE: RE-CENTERING GOD AND DE-CENTERING SELF WITHIN THE PUBLIC SQUARE  
by Bruce Ashford
- 33** GOING DARK: THE RISE AND SIGNIFICANCE OF JORDAN PETERSON AND THE "INTELLECTUAL DARK WEB"  
by Esther O'Reilly
- 37** "THE GOSPEL ADDRESSES ALL OF LIFE": ON RACE AND IDENTITY WITH H. B. CHARLES, JR.
- 41** YOUR PROSPERITY IS TOO SMALL: THE FALSE PROMISES OF HEALTH-AND-WEALTH RELIGION  
by Costi W. Hinn
- 43** COUNTING THE COST AND COUNTING THE JOY: A CALL TO CHRISTIAN WOMEN  
by Abigail Dodds
- 45** PRINCIPALLY CONSERVATIVE, CONVICTIONALLY CHRISTIAN: ON TRANSCENDENT TRUTHS AND DIVINE REALITIES  
by Don Sweeting
- 50** "IT'S SIMPLY A CHRISTIAN WITNESS": THOMAS KIDD ON THE VALUE OF EVANGELICAL SCHOLARSHIP
- 55** THE DEBONAIR AND DELIGHTFUL WILLIAM F. BUCKLEY, JR.: WHAT EVANGELICAL PUBLIC INTELLECTUALS MIGHT LEARN FROM A CATHOLIC LUMINARY  
by Andrew Walker
- 58** GENTLEMEN SHEPHERDS AND INVISIBLE SHERPAS: THE TASK OF THEOLOGICAL EDUCATORS  
by Jason G. Duesing
- 65** THE THEOLOGY OF THE BIBLE AND THE MISSION OF THE CHURCH  
by Jonathan Leeman
- 70** IN ASHES, BUILD: NOTES ON A THEORY OF CULTURE  
by Owen Strachan

# The First Things of *Permanent Things*

*Permanent Things* is a Southern Baptist journal on Christ and culture, a theological loci codified in the twentieth century by a mainline Protestant theologian, the title of which springs from the writings of a Gothic Catholic who first sighted the phrase “permanent things” in the cultural criticism of an Anglican poet born in the state of Missouri. It sounds fantastic, but it is all true. In *Permanent Things*, we consider the way in which evangelical faith—derived in historic terms from the discoveries of the Reformers both magisterial and, to a not insubstantial degree, radical—collides with a fallen world and an increasingly secular order. Said differently, we engage H. Richard Niebuhr’s discipline with the confessional conviction of cross-loving Baptists under the banner of T. S. Eliot’s (and Russell Kirk’s, by popularization) famous descriptor of the most important institutions, ideas, and realities of our world: human nature, freedom, virtue, civil and cultural order, morality. From an evangelical standpoint, we may explicitly include a biblical conception of the family, church, and public square in this list.

*Permanent Things* comes in tumultuous times, when everything seems to be politics and politics seems to be everything. Previous political occurrences have upended the previous order and, in a real sense, changed the situation of the evangelical movement. The task of

*Permanent Things* is not to enter headfirst into the partisan arena; that is the honorable duty and call of some, but our charge is to assist the church (pastors and elders most directly) in thinking in a distinctively Christian (and even Baptist) way in a climate in which such assistance is in short supply.

The contributors of this first issue are a gifted bunch. Most are Baptist or credobaptist; all are warmly evangelical, and all have staked their life and work on the Word of God. Their articles range across matters of culture, theology, and the public square; some are testimonial, some are pedagogical, and some are analytical. The collective effort here is a bold one; we dare to try to think *well* in this little journal, and to do so not with arrogance borne of confidence in ourselves, but with hope borne of confidence in the mind and will of God. Evangelicals, it must be said, have not always excelled in this area, the life of the mind, with particular respect to matters of Christ and culture. In some cases, we have lagged behind our Catholic neighbors. It is my hope that the rising generation of evangelicals will not fail to hear the call to love God with their mind, and to seek to be salt and light in this evil order, knowing that faithfulness to this sacred mission depends not on baptizing non-Christian thought, but on being uniquely and unmistakably evangelical, born-again, Spirit-indwelt, and Great Commission-minded.

It has been a joy to work on this project through the auspices of the Center for Public Theology at Midwestern Baptist Theological Seminary. I thank Dr. Jason Allen for his vision for the center and Dr. Jason Duesing for the suggestion to start this journal. My thanks as well to Mike Brooks, my sharp-eyed assistant, and to the excellence-pursuing team of the Communications department, a division led by Charles Smith. And now: to the permanent things—their defense and promotion, *coram deo*.

**Dr. Owen Strachan, Editor**

# Leonardo DaVinci, James Cameron, and Trans-Species “Love”: The Brave New Vision of Posthumanism

By Michael J. Plato



**THE OSCAR WINNER FOR BEST PICTURE IN 2018,** *The Shape of Water*, was in many ways a classic Hollywood choice. Directed by Mexican visionary filmmaker, Guillermo del Toro, it was a sweeping romantic fantasy which celebrated the power of movies. Hollywood likes nothing more than something that is a little self-congratulatory. Villains were fought, prejudices were overcome, the boy gets the girl, and there was even a show stopping musical dance number. As the film was released in 2018, there were a few modifications to the traditional narrative. In this case, the main villain was a Bible-quoting Christian, the prejudices were many, and the boy was a fish. (The dance number was pretty classic, however.)

That *The Shape of Water* was the first trans-species romance to be so publicly celebrated seemed to be taken in stride by most media outlets without much comment. If anything, the romance between the woman and the “fishman” was generally read as a metaphor for the embracing of “the other.”<sup>1</sup> Christians and other traditionalists who watched the film may have read it as simply another example of Hollywood’s further decline. Yet it was also a sign of a much wider phenomenon that has only recently been gaining scholarly attention, namely, the complete reassessment

of what it means to be human. I think some sense of this was captured by Pope Benedict XVI a few years ago when he said:

The manipulation of nature, which we deplore today where our environment is concerned, now becomes man’s fundamental choice where he himself is concerned. From now on, there is only the abstract human being, who chooses for himself what his nature is to be.<sup>2</sup>

Some aspects of this transformation have been front and center to our cultural consciousness. The transgender movement, as well as a number of other identity rights issues, such as the use of public restrooms, military and athletics admissions, and proper gender pronoun usage, have come to dominate our media discourse. Yet it is my contention that these recent developments in society and even popular entertainment are not the end of some sort of sequence, but are merely a symptomatic prelude of bigger things to come. These ‘bigger things’ may be encapsulated by the term *posthumanism*.

Over the past decade or so, there has been a virtual explosion of academic interest in posthumanism. Superficially, this may sound like the next trendy thing following postmodernism, and there are those who see it merely as a small subcategory of this nebulous movement. I would argue that posthumanism is much more aggressive and substantial than postmodernism ever was, and it has become much more broadly comprehensive, embracing developments in science and technology, philosophy, sociology, the arts, and popular culture. Indeed, while the academy has only recently begun to assess this new understanding of what it means to be human, much of popular culture has already been exploring the possibilities for decades.

I shall begin by first explaining the concept of

<sup>1</sup> For an example of this, see: <https://www.vox.com/2018/3/5/17079236/shape-of-water-best-picture-oscar-why-won> (Accessed 02/15/2019).

<sup>2</sup> Benedict XVI, *Address of His Holiness, Benedict XVI on the Occasion of Christmas Greetings to the Roman Curia*. December 21, 2012. [http://w2.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/speeches/2012/december/documents/hf\\_ben-xvi\\_spe\\_20121221\\_auguri-curia.html](http://w2.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/speeches/2012/december/documents/hf_ben-xvi_spe_20121221_auguri-curia.html) (Accessed 25 March, 2019).

posthumanism and the competing and complimentary term, transhumanism. Then, I will briefly show how these concepts are already familiar to many of us through popular culture artifacts. Finally, I will modestly posit what this is going to mean for Christians in terms of future engagement. Before we can begin to understand posthumanism, we need to first look at the humanism it seeks to be “post.”

## Humanism

Human-centered philosophies have been around for millennia, yet they seemed to have taken on a particular cast in the western European Renaissance. In addition to philosophers, artists such as Leonardo DaVinci (1452–1519), the poet Petrarch (1304–1374), and others contributed to a new image of man as noble perfection. “What a piece of work is man,” wrote Shakespeare a century after DaVinci, yet still capturing the shimmering dream, “How noble in reason, how infinite in faculty, In form and moving how express and admirable, In action how like an Angel, In apprehension how like a god.” This view of man set the standard for European civilization. Linked to this poetic and visual representation were the humanistic ideals of reason, freedom, self-awareness, and self-determination. These were the creature features which distinguished “man” from all other forms of life and placed him at the top of the food chain.

Importantly, the assumptions embedded in this ideal were said to be universal, and, as such, were not only inclusive, but also exclusive as well. This at least was the critique articulated when the ideal began to be taken to task in the 1960s and 70s, first by feminist critics, and later, by postcolonialists. Essentially, when looking at this image, these critics were asking, “Is that what I’m supposed to look like, too?” The feminist Luce Irigaray pointed out that the allegedly abstract concept of “Man” was not only very much male, but also white, European,

handsome, able-bodied, and young. What exactly this ideal shared with the statistical average of humanity was, for her, a question that needed to be addressed.<sup>3</sup>

Irigaray and others noted that *if* this model was to be regarded as universal, then the female, for example, could only be seen as particular, and, therefore, as *other*. Other was to be different and different was to be worthless. Being worthless, one was also therefore exploitable and disposable. Later, post-colonial critics were to make the same argument with regards to race and ethnicity. One must concede that these critics of humanism, a humanism which had its origins within the secularism of the Renaissance and the Enlightenment it may be added, do have a point. For instance, Jean-Paul Sartre noted the connection between humanism, specifically its notions of rationality, and violence.<sup>4</sup> Reason is not exclusive from violence, far from it. The Canadian scholar, John Ralston Saul, in his book *Voltaire’s Bastards: The Dictatorship of Reason in the West*, demonstrated how humanistic, or Enlightenment, rationality apologized for violence as well as implemented it. Saul also notes that it was in the wake of the Enlightenment that the category of “race” became increasingly important in European thinking in terms of defining what it meant to be human.<sup>5</sup> We can see the consequences of this most clearly in the horrors that were accomplished in the name of reason and racial superiority, such as the social engineering of the slave trade, at Auschwitz during World War II, or in the gulags of Soviet era Russia.

This critique of humanism grew and eventually became known as the anti-humanist movement. Beginning first with the feminists and post-colonialists, it was later picked up by gender theorists, queer theorists, post-structuralists, and others. Anti-humanists did not entirely reject all humanist values. For instance, most of them favoured the humanistic concept of freedom.

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<sup>3</sup> Luce Irigaray, *Speculum of the Other Woman* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1985) and *This Sex Which Is Not One* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1985).

<sup>4</sup> See Istvan Meszaros, *The Work of Sartre: Search for Freedom and the Challenge of History* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2012), Chapter 6, “Material and Formal Structures of History: Critique of Sartre’s Conception of Dialectical Reason and Historical Totalization,” esp. 265.

<sup>5</sup> John Ralston Saul, *Voltaire’s Bastards: The Dictatorship of Reason in the West* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1992).

But they did strongly resist humanism's normalizing conventions, which they saw as discriminatory.<sup>6</sup>

These thinkers were, of course, not operating in a vacuum. The groundwork for this rejection of humanism was first laid down by the German philosopher, Friedrich Nietzsche (1844–1900) in the nineteenth century, when he sought to subvert the rationalist ideal of knowledge that there is an underlying order to the universe. Nietzsche was important because he was one of the first major western philosophers to reject rationalism and open up the possibility for 'alternative styles' of thinking.<sup>7</sup> Most famously, Nietzsche's proposal was embodied in his concept of the Übermensch, or "Overman," which set for humanity the goal of transcending itself through a sheer act of will.

Later the French theorist Michel Foucault (1926–1984) would build on Nietzsche's concept of the Übermensch and his proclamation of the death of God, and would himself proclaim the "death of man." Foucault insisted that "Man is only a recent invention, and one perhaps nearing its end."<sup>8</sup> What he was referring to was humanism. Humanism, as Foucault saw it, was "... everything in Western civilization that restricts the desire for power."<sup>9</sup> As the Cambridge historian, John Coffey, noted:

Foucault made it clear that he endorsed Nietzsche's view on self-creation. Sartre and California New Agers had gone awry, he suggested, because they had introduced the notion of 'authenticity', implying that one had to be faithful to one's *true*

self. In fact, there was nothing within or without to which one had to be true—self-creation has no such limits. It was about aesthetics, not morals; one's only concern should be to fashion a self that was a 'work of art'.<sup>10</sup>

Humanity had no essence to it, and neither did the individual person. There was nothing quintessentially human or deep within ourselves that we had to uncover. We were what we made of ourselves.

## Posthumanism

Posthumanism is that moment which marks the end of the conflict between humanism and anti-humanism and the beginning of the quest to find a replacement. The posthumanist perspective rests on the assumption of the decline of humanism and the end of the European Enlightenment project, but rejects the despair of modernity and instead looks to alternative possibilities. In this sense, it sees itself as largely optimistic. Grounding itself in the liberation movements of the last century, such as anti-colonialism and the women's rights movements, developments in science and technology, especially in genetics and cybernetics, as well as Foucault's project of self-creation, it builds on the critique of the anti-humanist legacy towards a new vision of humanity.

A significant move in this direction occurred with the publication of Donna Haraway's *Cyborg Manifesto* in 1985.<sup>11</sup> For Haraway, the cyborg, a creation of Science Fiction, is an in-between creature, "between the human and the machine, neither human nor machine, both human and machine."<sup>12</sup> For Haraway, the Cyborg was a

<sup>6</sup> For a comprehensive history of Antihumanist philosophy, see Stefanos Geroulanos, *An Atheism That is Not Humanist Emerges in French Thought* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2010).

<sup>7</sup> Petra Perry, "Deleuze's Nietzsche," *Boundary 2.20* (1993): 175.

<sup>8</sup> Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences* (New York: Routledge, 2002), 422.

<sup>9</sup> Saul Newman, "Max Stirner and the Politics of Posthumanism," *Contemporary Political Theory 1* (2002): 232.

<sup>10</sup> John Coffey, *Life after the Death of God? Michel Foucault and Postmodern Atheism* (1996) available from <http://www.jubilee-centre.org/michel-foucault-and-postmodern-atheism-life-after-the-death-of-god-by-john-coffey/>. Accessed 10 March, 2019.

<sup>11</sup> Donna Haraway, "A Manifesto for Cyborgs: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the 1980s," in *The Gendered Cyborg: A Reader*, eds. Gill Kirkup, Linda Janes, Kath Woodward, and Fiona Hovenden (New York: Routledge, 2000): 50–57.

<sup>12</sup> Pramod K. Nayar, *Posthumanism*, (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2014), 22.



model on which boundary-breakings could occur. Not only did she see this affecting the boundaries between male and female, which we have seen happening in transgenderism already, but also between human and non-human, organism and machine, the physical and the non-physical, and even between technology and the self.

At the end of the 1990s, one of the first “suggestive” definitions of posthumanism was put forward by Katherine Hayles. Her definition is worth quoting at length as it not only demonstrates posthumanist ambitions, but also something of their philosophical underpinnings:

First, the posthuman view privileges informational pattern over material instantiation, so that embodiment in a biological substrate is seen as an accident of history rather than an inevitability of life. Second, the posthuman view considers consciousness, regarded as the seat of human identity in the Western tradition long before Descartes thought he was a mind thinking, as an epiphenomenon, as an evolutionary upstart trying to claim that it is the whole show when in actuality it is only a minor sideshow. Third, the posthuman view thinks of the body as the original prosthesis we all learn to manipulate, so that extending or replacing the body with other prostheses becomes a continuation of a process that began before we were born. Fourth, and most important, by these and other means, the posthuman view configures human being so that it can be seamlessly articulated with intelligent machines. In the posthuman, there are no essential differences or absolute demarcations between bodily existence and computer simulation, cybernetic mechanism and biological organism, robot teleology and human goals.<sup>13</sup>

While there is much to unpack here, what is most important to note at this point is that posthumanism

has moved beyond merely righting the injustices of a biased definition. It is now proscriptive, and optimistically so, in terms of defining the human as “open” to merging with other life and even technology.

## The Return of Spinoza

For Haraway, Hayles, and others to even entertain such possibilities required a seismic shift in the understanding of the nature of reality, and this shift had already begun to happen in French thought in the 1960s. A number of students of Louis Althusser (1918–1990) in Paris started reading the Dutch philosopher Baruch Spinoza (1632–1677) in the quest for an alternative to Marxism which they had already declared dead. Instead of Marxism, they wanted to revive Spinoza’s concept of Monism, which they saw as the best way forward.<sup>14</sup>

What is monism? Monism is the notion that the universe is made up of one thing and one thing alone: matter. Matter which is intelligent and self-organizing. In a “monistic universe,” according to Spinoza, matter, the world, and humans are non-dualistic. There was no transcendent or spiritual dimension to reality. Spinoza was reacting against Descartes’ mind/body distinction and said that mind and body were the same thing. As there was no difference between mind and body, there was likewise no difference between a person and the world, or between the world and God. We are all one.

In religious language, monism has also been described as pantheism. Most of the Neo-Spinozists, however, have dropped the references to God and advocate an essentially atheistic monism.

Monism becomes the foundation for a posthumanism because it avoids the human-centredness of humanism by its emphasis on the unity of all matter in the universe. *We are one with the cosmos. So what is so special about us?* A significant update of Spinoza’s concept, which is central to posthumanism, involves

<sup>13</sup> N. Katherine Hayles, *How We Became Posthuman* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), 2–3.

<sup>14</sup> For a key early work in this development see Pierre Macherey, *Hegel or Spinoza* trans, Susan M. Ruddick (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011).

the scientific understanding of the self-organizing, or ‘smart’ structure of living matter. The Italian/Australian posthumanist Rosi Braidotti calls this the “embodiment of the mind and embrainment of the body.” What we call life is simply ‘smart matter.’ And perhaps, she concludes, what we call non-life can be smart matter as well.<sup>15</sup> Other thinkers outside of the humanities have picked up on this idea of all matter having mental processes as well. Called *panpsychism* by David Skrbina, it has been described as “the view that all things have mind or a mind-like quality...Mind is seen as fundamental to the nature of existence and being.”<sup>16</sup>

In opposition to idealism and Cartesian dualism, panpsychism argues that mind is not ethereal, or something that exists apart from the material world. As mathematician and cyberpunk novelist Rudy Rucker puts it, mind or sentience is “a universally distributed quality” and “each object has a mind. Stars, hills, chairs, rocks, scraps of paper, flakes of skin, molecules — each of them possesses the same inner glow as a human, each of them has singular inner experiences and sensations.”<sup>17</sup>

This ‘vital materialism’ is picked up by the philosophers Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, in their books *Anti-Oedipus* and *A Thousand Plateaus*, in which they argue that we can overcome the old human by merging with other aspects of the world.<sup>18</sup> Braidotti has labelled three of these processes, “becoming animal, becoming earth, and becoming machine.”<sup>19</sup> They involve displacing the old humanity through solidarity with other species, or even non-species, and the political push for animals, environments, and technologies to attain human

or near human rights. As we are beginning to see, posthumanism starts to take on an entirely new hue. Not merely is it “post” European humanism, but of the human itself in terms of species.

One begins to grasp the implications that this kind of thinking encourages when one considers that a legal goal of many posthumanists is the shift from human rights to what Braidotti calls *zoe*-centred egalitarianism. It doesn’t matter if you have a human body, a machine body, or an animal body, or a combination of the above. What matters is that you exist and that you are in an interconnected codependence with everything else. Individual rights are to be supplanted by an ethos of “sustainability.”<sup>20</sup>

## Postanthropocentrism

Moving beyond the question of what defines the human within the context of the human, we are now looking at an entirely new category, namely species awareness. Species-thinking has never been a subject for the humanities before, but we are now seeing ecocriticism, animal studies, and monster studies becoming some of the hottest fields in the “humanities.”<sup>21</sup> Is it possible to study ecology, animals, and “monsters” in the humanities? Some people like Donna Haraway think so.

Yet this is not just all academic discourse. Business and science are already there in terms of bringing humans and animals together, certainly at the level of biogenetics and what is called “cognitive capitalism.” Melinda Cooper has noted in her book *Life as Surplus*, the real capital for advanced capitalism is life itself – life in the sense

<sup>15</sup> Rosi Braidotti, *Nomadic Theory: The Portable Rosi Braidotti* (New York, Columbia University Press, 2011), 3.

<sup>16</sup> David Skrbina, *Panpsychism in the West* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2005).

<sup>17</sup> Rudy Rucker, “Mind is a Universally Distributed Quality,” *Edge*, [www.edge.org/q2006/q06\\_3.html#rucker](http://www.edge.org/q2006/q06_3.html#rucker) (Accessed January 4, 2016)

<sup>18</sup> Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983); Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987).

<sup>19</sup> Rosi Braidotti, *The Posthuman* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2013), 66.

<sup>20</sup> See Patrick Hanafin, “A Micropolitics of Posthuman Rights” in *Posthuman Glossary*, eds. Rose Braidotti and Maria Hlavajova (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2018): 352–355 and Rosi Braidotti, *Transpositions: On Nomadic Ethics* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2006).

<sup>21</sup> For ecocriticism see Timothy Clark, *The Value of Ecocriticism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019); for animal studies see Dawne McCance, *Critical Animal Studies: An Introduction* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2013); for a survey of the field of monster studies see the special issue of *The University of Toronto Quarterly*, Vol. 87, No.1, (Winter 2018).

of the informational code of all that lives.<sup>22</sup> We already control the genetic code of our own species as well as that of multiple others. “Designer cells” have already been produced and the prospect for growing human organs in other species or in machines is currently being tested. What will be next? As Rosi Braidotti notes, and she chooses her words very carefully here, we are witnessing the end of “biblical reproduction.”<sup>23</sup> Just as academic posthumanists are erasing species distinctions intellectually, so too university scientists and corporate businesses are erasing the distinctions between species in the physical world.

## Transhumanism

This convergence of humanity with technology is a central feature of much of posthumanist thought. This brings us alongside another and, in many ways, a competing school of thought known as “transhumanism.” Transhumanism is perhaps better known to most people thanks to its better marketing, and people often confuse transhumanism with posthumanism, thinking they are synonyms.

Like posthumanism, transhumanism explores the space between the human and technology; but, while posthumanism looks to technology as a means of merging with the rest of the world and erasing the distinctiveness of the human, transhumanists see technology as evolution, advancing the cause of the human, especially human liberation. Liberation from disease and mortality, liberation from reproduction for feminist transhumanists, and even liberation from the limitations of the body itself.

In a sense, transhumanism is merely the old humanism by other means, and for this reason, many posthumanists strongly reject being correlated with it.<sup>24</sup>

Transhumanism ultimately accepts the major premises of humanism that the individual is autonomous, reason is the key marker of personhood and identity, and the human is not enmeshed in the world, but above it. In some ways, it is an intensification of humanism, arguing that perceived limitations, such as biology, can be overcome by technological means, resulting at some point in the future in an advanced human form, with greater intelligence, greater longevity and greater wellbeing. It can be argued that, within the transhumanist movement, there is a fundamental goal of achieving immortality through technology.

Perhaps even more so than in posthumanism, the religious ambitions of transhumanism are nakedly apparent.<sup>25</sup> Transhumanist proponents regularly invoke religious language, talking of immortality, the spiritual capacities of technology, and humans becoming “god-like.” Zoltan Istvan, a major cheerleader for the movement, and the Transhumanist Party candidate for the U.S. presidential election of 2016, speaks enthusiastically of the day when we all become immortal cyborgs, human brains preserved in mechanical bodies.<sup>26</sup>

Yet this is a different kind of spirituality than posthumanism. Much of the transhumanist project is geared towards developing technologies that could eventually lead to substituting flesh with biomechanical material, or of downloading the human mind into computers, or integrating human minds with one another via network hook-up. If posthumanism is a new and sophisticated form of pantheism, where all is interconnected and one, then transhumanism is a cutting edge and technologically savvy Gnosticism, where the body is seen as something to be overcome, and the mind or intellect is that which is ethereal and needs

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<sup>22</sup> Melinda Cooper, *Life as Surplus: Biotechnology and Capitalism in the Neoliberal Era* (Seattle, WA: University of Washington Press, 2008).

<sup>23</sup> Stated at a lecture on Posthumanism given at the University of Toronto, Toronto, Canada, February 2, 2015.

<sup>24</sup> For a comprehensive posthumanist perspective on the differences between trans and posthumanism see Francesca Ferrando, “Transhumanism/Posthumanism” in *Posthuman Glossary*: 438–439.

<sup>25</sup> For a number of perspectives on Transhumanism and religion see *Religion and Transhumanism: The Unknown Future of Human Enhancement* eds. Calvin Mercer and Tracy J. Trothen (Santa Barbara, CA: Praeger, 2015).

<sup>26</sup> See the Transhumanist Party website here: <https://transhumanist-party.org/>



to be freed or shifted to ever higher planes of existence.<sup>27</sup>

It is not surprising then that many within the movement are deliberately forging transhumanism into a legitimate religion. Though most transhumanists still shun the word religion, which they feel must be connected to the belief in a higher being, as well as operating within the confines of oppressive dogma and institutional structures, they nevertheless are beginning to speak of it as a religion-eclipsing philosophy. The World Transhumanist Association, which recently rebranded itself as HumanityPlus (H+), describes Transhumanism as “a class of philosophies of life that seek the continuation and acceleration of the evolution of intelligent life beyond its currently human form and human limitations by means of science and technology.”<sup>28</sup> While it may sound a little dull, the Transhumanist Dirk Bruere declares that transhumanism is “the single most momentous event in a billion years.”<sup>29</sup>

While most Transhumanists come from the science and engineering fields and could largely be described as atheistic, not all of them are. Some religious groups have also attempted to jump on the bandwagon. There are some “Christian Transhumanists,” as well as even Mormon Transhumanists.<sup>30</sup> The Mormon Transhumanist Association, which was the first religious organization to publicly affiliate itself with transhumanism, seeks to bridge the gap comparing transhumanism to the Mormon theological concept of theosis, which is the process by which humans eventually become gods.<sup>31</sup>

## Posthuman Entertainment

The film *The Shape of Water* has already been described as emblematic of this movement towards a new definition of the human, and much of what has been discussed so far should bear this out. Yet the del Toro film is not an exception. In fact, Hollywood has been preparing the way for posthumanism for some time.

Special effects and new digital technologies have recently allowed for remarkable possibilities in visual imagery and cinematic storytelling. This has been a boon for artists with posthuman aspirations and sensibilities. Some movies show the transformation of the human through union with the other more directly. The *Alien* movie series (1979, 1986, 1992, 1997, 2012, 217), starring Sigourney Weaver, demonstrated this by showing the merging of the human with the alien and the monstrous. In the first two movies, humans are used to “birth” alien creatures, i.e. the alien is inside of us. In the third film, the main character of Ripley literally becomes the mother of an alien, and in the fourth, Ripley is “resurrected” biomechanically, but with her genes completely fused with that of the alien creature, and we witness the birth of a human/alien hybrid as a new species.

More pleasantly there is, of course, the *Star Wars* series (1977-). While the pantheistic philosophy behind the *Star Wars* universe and its concept of the force has been discussed to the point of banality, it is interesting to note the almost casual way that humans are shown to live in harmony with alien creatures and monsters as well as cybernetic and robotics beings. (These films, we note, do show troubling aspects of bringing the

<sup>27</sup> The comparison between Transhumanism and Gnosticism has been made countless times already, especially within the Christian publishing world, yet there are Transhumanists and Transhumanist scholars who strongly reject the comparison. Gnosticism in its early forms, was hostile to the material world, which was considered evil and to be rejected. Transhumanists, on the other hand, have no negative attitudes towards the material world, and do not share Gnosticism’s dualism. In an unpublished paper, Stanislas Deprez of l’Université Catholique de Lille argues that if Transhumanism has any religious equivalent it is *Joachism*, a form of medieval Christian millenarism.

<sup>28</sup> <https://whatistranshumanism.org/> (Accessed 25 March, 2019). For Humanity Plus see <https://humanityplus.org/>

<sup>29</sup> Dirk Bruere, “Transhumanism—The Final Religion?” *Institute for Ethics and Emerging Technologies*. <http://ieet.org/index.php/IEET/more/bruere20150715> (Accessed: 25 March, 2019).

<sup>30</sup> See the Christian Transhumanist Association website: <https://www.christiantranshumanism.org/>

<sup>31</sup> See the Mormon Transhumanist Association website: <http://transfigurism.org/>. See also Hava Tirosh-Samuels, “Religion” in *Post- and Transhumanism: An Introduction* eds. Robert Ranisch and Stefan Lorenz Sorgner (Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 2014), 66–67.

biological and technology together, as witnessed by the storyline of Darth Vader.)

Other movies, in a more serious vein, have sought to explore the pitfalls and potentialities of artificial companion species. *Westworld* (1973), *Her* (2013), *Ex Machina* (2014), and *Bladerunner 2049* (2017) give us a sense of how we might negotiate with the technological other. Vampire and zombie movies and television shows, which have become extremely popular, explore the fantasy and dark side complexities of the transhumanist desire to live forever.

Then there are the extremely popular *Jurassic Park* (1993, 1997, 2001) and *Jurassic World* (2015, 2018) films which clearly demonstrate the link between biotec and the drive of cognitive capitalism taken to the extreme. We will create creatures just to entertain ourselves. Or, as in *Jurassic World: Fallen Kingdom* (2018), creatures will be created as new forms of weapons.

Transhumanism's push for superhuman immortality seems to be one of the most consistent champs at the box office of recent, especially in its guise as the superhero narrative. From X-men's superior "evolved" group of good looking mutants, and Spiderman's radioactively induced "spidey" powers, to Batman and Ironman's technological exoskeleton, to the virtual "god-like" qualities of Superman and Thor, young people and old are now being regularly fed a diet of images of humans that move above and beyond the merely human.

The concept of digitally mediated identities, which really began with the cyberpunk fiction of the 1980s, has at least given some of us the hope that we may be able to transcend our limited humanity, if only temporarily. Two of the most successful "lighter" films of recent, *Ready Player One* (2018) and *Jumanji: Welcome to the Jungle* (2018), were about central characters inhabiting alternative realities and alternative physical identities.

Perhaps the most remarkable and brilliant cinematic representation of posthumanism is the James Cameron film *Avatar* (2009). Much has been made of the pagan and pantheistic backdrop of the film, especially by Christian commentators, noting especially the religious practices of the Na'vi beings at the center of the story. But there is much more to it. In *Avatar*, we are witnessing the depiction of a new humanity, digitally mediated into a post-species form. Humanity is represented as having a multipresent subjectivity, which is simultaneously virtual and biological. We live in the biological and the tech at the same time.

The central character of Jake Sully, a representation of the old humanist human (he is male, white and represents imperialistic military and corporate interests) is also crippled, representing the old European humanism as a crippled tradition. Via virtual technology, he is able to escape the identity politics of the past. People are no longer identified by their race. They are neither white nor black nor brown. They're blue! Sully takes on an alien appearance, one which exhibits decidedly animalistic characteristics, and these Na'vi can directly "link" with various other animal species, demonstrating the interrelatedness of creatures and life. A very important development in Cameron's aliens, though, is their strongly sexual and erotic characteristics, and indeed the film suggests the character has an active sexuality in his newly embodied existence. The future, according to this film, is technologically enhanced trans species transsexuality.<sup>32</sup>

## Toward a Christian Response

In terms of a posthuman future, there can be little real debate, for it is already here. Its manifestations have not yet been as extreme as many of its advocates could hope for, but its continued growth in popular society does appear inevitable. We, of course, must not ignore what is good in it. For one thing, it attacks a form of secular humanism which has been dominant in the West for at least four centuries. As Christians, we do not have much cause to lament secular humanism's demise,

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<sup>32</sup> For a comprehensive study of posthumanism in cinema and television see *The Palgrave Handbook of Posthumanism in Film and Television*, eds. Michael Hauskeller, Thomas D. Philbeck and Curtis D. Carbonell (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015).

or at least in the demise of certain of its characteristics.

Yet there is nevertheless much that is concerning and we are only in the early stages of responding to a movement that is just beginning to make itself visible. As with challenges to the faith that have arisen in the past, one of the most effective responses will most certainly be the development of doctrine. In this case, that of anthropology or the doctrine of humanity. I speculate that much of this will involve reaffirming many of the key elements of the earlier Western philosophical tradition, elements which have been pushed aside in this post-enlightenment world, such as an affirmation of transcendent realities, the classical idea of immaterial forms or essences and, in consequence, the dualistic (not monistic) nature of humanity. Beyond this, and ultimately, we must affirm and be clearer in presenting that even greater reality, namely what it means as humans to be the *imago dei*, made in the image of God. I want to conclude with the words of Pope Benedict XVI again from the same address from a few years ago:

When the freedom to be creative becomes the freedom to create oneself, then necessarily the Maker himself is denied and ultimately man too is stripped of his dignity as a creature of God, as the image of God at the core of his being...when God is denied, human dignity also disappears. Whoever defends God is defending man.<sup>33</sup>

In other words, the human question is ultimately a God question. •

<sup>33</sup> Benedict XVI, *ibid.*

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# ‘What You’re About to Witness is Not Magic’: Christopher Nolan’s Cinema of Immanent Wonder

By Brett McCracken



**RANCIS FORD COPPOLA ONCE REMARKED** that “cinema, movies, and magic have always been closely associated. The very earliest people who made film were magicians.”

He’s right. With origins in vaudeville and the sorts of eye-popping spectacles you’d find in the circus (bearded ladies, sword swallows, Harry Houdini), moving images were and always have been props for illusionists. From cinematic pioneers like the Lumière brothers and Georges Méliès to blockbuster savants Steven Spielberg or Peter Jackson today, filmmakers are magicians who—like David Copperfield, David Blaine, or Penn and Teller—make the impossible happen before our eyes.

For the earliest film audiences, movie magic was simply seeing real things—horses, trains, people—come to life on a screen. We have little concept today of how mind-blowing it must have been for people at the turn of the twentieth century to see *moving images* of what looked like something they could feel and touch but which was really just flickering pixels of light, interpreted by the brain as reality. It felt spectral, phantasmagoric. It was the epitome of awe-inspiring.

But the magic of movies has extended beyond perceptual basics. Movie narratives mimic all manner of “magical” and supernatural things: time travel (flashbacks, flashforwards, etc.), teleportation (whisking the audience all over the globe), the ability to hear people’s unspoken thoughts, the ability to see things only the audience can see. Then there is everything fanciful that special effects can render: wizards, dragons, orcs, talking toys, all manner of creation and destruction, pretty much anything that can be dreamed up.

It’s no surprise, then, that we talk about “movie magic.” But well into its second century now, cinema has arguably lost some of its magic. Digital effects, and the excessive manner in which they are deployed, have dulled our senses to the magic we used to experience in the movie theater. Little impresses us anymore. Furthermore, most contemporary audiences now have a general awareness of how movie-making trickery works (thanks to DVD commentaries, behind-the-scenes features, YouTube, and so forth). The “how’d they do that?” questions and wow factors are largely gone from the movie-making experience.

## Christopher Nolan’s Brand of Movie Magic

But there are some filmmakers who still capture the magic, who boldly believe it is still possible to surprise and wow audiences, film-savvy and tech-literate as we are. Christopher Nolan is one of them. From the backwards storytelling of *Memento* (2000) to the space-bending *Inception* (2010) and time-bending *Interstellar* (2014), each Nolan film feels like an event. Whether he’s tackling iconic superheroes (*The Dark Knight* trilogy) or World War II history (*Dunkirk*), the British filmmaker employs the full range of cinematic sleight-of-hand to keep audiences engaged and enthralled. A stalwart defender of practical effects and narrative trickery over CGI shortcuts (which he calls “boring”), Nolan is an *auteur* who is fiercely committed to the enduring magic of movies.

But Nolan’s is a thoroughly modern brand of movie magic. It is magic shorn of transcendence and the supernatural; a scientific magic of the sort described in Arthur C. Clarke’s Third Law (“Any sufficiently advanced technology is indistinguishable from magic”). It is

magic that exists to wow and amuse us, but wholly (and proudly) within what Charles Taylor would call “the immanent frame.”<sup>34</sup>

Some movie magic transports us beyond the immanent frame, leaving us spiritually unsettled and curious about the world beyond. But Nolan’s magic directs our gaze at the wonders *here*: the natural, the scientific, the human. It’s a magic that rejects humanity’s need for something supernatural, insisting instead that we are our own greatest miracle and that the “natural” is super enough in its own right. All the wonder we need is right here within immanence, the material and observable world.

### Awe at the Mastery of Man

Observation is key to Nolan’s cinema. “Are you watching closely?” is the question posed to the audience in the opening minutes of Nolan’s *The Prestige* (2006), a film about rival illusionists (Christian Bale and Hugh Jackman) that serves as Nolan’s meta commentary on the idea of magic in cinema. Nolan wants an engaged audience that attends to and appreciates cinema’s sleight-of-hand. In *The Prestige* and all his other films, Nolan wants to shake audiences out of the lazy narrative contrivances they’re used to. He believes they are capable of tracking with whatever temporal, spatial, auditory complexity he throws at them, if they’re up for a challenge. But are they?

“Now you’re looking for the secret,” Michael Caine’s character says late in *The Prestige*. “But you won’t find it because of course, you’re not really looking. You don’t really want to work it out. You want to be fooled.” Speaking directly to the audience here, Nolan might as well be saying, “Fairy tales, ghosts, God... you choose to believe in these fanciful things but if you just look harder you’ll see the truth. Behind all magic is an explanation.” Indeed, Jackman’s magician character puts it bluntly when he says: “What you’re about to witness is not magic. It is purely science.”

Buzzkill? Not in Nolan’s mind. For him, the true thrill is unveiling the behind-the-curtain realities that explain the mysterious “magic” in the world. The true miracles are what humanity can achieve through solidarity (*Dunkirk*). The most impressive things about superheroes are the very clever ways everyday humans employ technology and teamwork to defeat bad guys (*The Dark Knight* films). Nolan goes out of his way to strip even a superhero film of anything supernatural, underscoring a point he wants to make in all his films: there is no need to dither around in speculative worlds of demons, angels, heaven, or hell. There is more than enough miraculous wonder to be experienced here, in the human and the observable.

In *Inception* and *Memento* (and perhaps also *Insomnia*), for example, Nolan mines drama from the “miraculous” mysteries of the human brain: dreams, memory, consciousness. The audience is left (rightly) awed by the intricacies of the human mind. Nolan himself said that he wanted the dream sequences in *Inception* to “reflect the infinite potential of the human mind.”<sup>35</sup>

In *Interstellar* and *Dunkirk*, Nolan celebrates the “miracle” of humanity’s survival instincts and ingenious resourcefulness. *Dunkirk* begins with an epigraph that notes how the beleaguered troops at Dunkirk were “hoping for deliverance . . . for a miracle.” Deliverance comes by film’s end, but not by any “miraculous” means—at least in the supernatural sense. It is deliverance by fellow humans. In the end, Nolan seems to suggest, our species saves itself.

*Interstellar* makes a similar point. The film’s conflict concerns a beleaguered humanity on a dying earth, brainstorming options for escape that will ensure human survival as a species. Throughout the film, we hear the Dylan Thomas line, “Do not go gentle into that good night. Rage, rage against the dying of the light.” It’s a rousing celebration of the “miracle” of human resilience. At various points in the film,

<sup>34</sup> Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Belknap Press, 2007).

<sup>35</sup> Robert Capps, “Q&A: Christopher Nolan on Dreams, Architecture, and Ambiguity,” *Wired* (November 29, 2010): [https://www.wired.com/2010/11/pl\\_inception\\_nolan/](https://www.wired.com/2010/11/pl_inception_nolan/)

the supernatural is suggested—ghostly beings from other dimensions seem to want to help earthlings in their predicament—but in the end (spoiler alert) the ghosts turn out to be other humans. Again, humans save themselves. We need no divine intervention of supernatural help, Nolan suggests. The natural, the scientific, is the only religion we need. To underscore the point, Hans Zimmer’s score is heavy on organ, recorded on a 1926 four-manual Harrison & Harrison organ that Zimmer said he chose “for its significance to science.”<sup>36</sup> The music in the film conveys a church-like ambience and cultivates awe, but it is awe at the mastery of man rather than the majesty of God.

If there is one thing man has *not* mastered, however, it is time. Mortality. And if there are holes in Nolan’s immanent frame, time and death are it—and he knows it.

## You Cannot Conquer Time

“O let not Time deceive you,” W.H. Auden once penned. “You cannot conquer Time.”<sup>37</sup> Indeed, as much as humans are constantly trying to conquer time (anti-aging methods, attempts at time travel, cryogenics, and so forth), it remains stubbornly unconquerable. Cinema perhaps comes the closest to conquering it. Andrei Tarkovsky said the essence of the film director’s work is “sculpting in time.”<sup>38</sup> With its unique ability to capture, rearrange, mold, and manipulate time, movies offer filmmakers and audiences the God-like ability to transcend time: to slow it down, to speed it up, to reverse its otherwise unalterable forward march. Tarkovsky hypothesized that time is why people are so drawn to movies:

I think that what a person normally goes to the cinema for is *time*: time lost or spent or not yet had. He goes there for living experience; for cinema, like no other art, widens, enhances and concentrates a person’s experience—and not only enhances it but makes it longer, significantly longer. That is the power of cinema.<sup>39</sup>

Some of the greatest filmmakers recognize the “sculpting in time” nature of the medium and its unique, visceral power to “take an impression of time,” as Tarkovsky would say.<sup>40</sup> Richard Linklater is perhaps the most well-known example. Gus van Sant, Kelly Reichardt, Jim Jarmusch, Abbas Kiarostami, and Yasujiro Ozu are others. These filmmakers make you *feel* time in their films, tapping into our existential ache to transcend death and impermanence.

Physicist Alan Lightman captures this ache well in *The Accidental Universe* when he writes:

I don’t know why we long so for permanence, why the fleeting nature of things so disturbs. With futility, we cling to the old wallet long after it has fallen apart. We visit and revisit the old neighborhood where we grew up, searching for the remembered grove of trees and the little fence. We clutch our old photographs. In our churches and synagogues and mosques, we pray to the everlasting and eternal. Yet, in every nook and cranny, nature screams at the top of her lungs that nothing lasts, that it is all passing away. All that we see around us, including our own bodies, is shifting and evaporating and one day will be gone.<sup>41</sup>

<sup>36</sup> Katie Kilkeny, “Why *Interstellar*’s Organ Needs to Be So Loud,” *The Atlantic* (November 11, 2014): <https://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2014/11/why-interstellars-organ-needs-to-be-so-loud/382619/>

<sup>37</sup> W.H. Auden, “As I Walked Out One Evening,” *Another Time* (Random House, 1940): <https://www.poets.org/poetsorg/poem/i-walked-out-one-evening>

<sup>38</sup> Andrei Tarkovsky, *Sculpting in Time* (New York: Alfred A Knopf, 1987), 63.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 62.

<sup>41</sup> Quoted in “Alan Lightman on Our Yearning for Immortality and Why We Long for Permanence in a Universe of Constant Change,” *Brain Pickings* (May 22, 2014): <https://www.brainpickings.org/2014/05/22/alan-lightman-accidental-universe-impermanence/>



With its power both to capture the brutality of the “all passing away” nature of existence, and also to transcend it, cinema provides a sort of existential release valve for those who might otherwise be crushed by the burden of temporality. In the movie theater, time is arrested. For a few hours, we can escape time’s relentlessness and travel across centuries, even millenia, perhaps to “a long time ago in a galaxy far, far away,” or maybe to sci-fi future cities, or even a whistle stop tour of the whole lifespan of the universe (e.g. Terrence Malick’s *The Tree of Life*). The experience is inherently spiritual because it mimics an outside-of-timeness impossible this side of eternity. It’s no wonder the movies have been called “the church of the masses.”

Christopher Nolan’s filmmaking is especially mindful of the spiritually charged power of cinema’s “sculpting in time.” Whether accentuating time by reversing it (*Memento*), compressing decades of aging into spans of minutes (*Interstellar*, *Inception*), or accelerating it through a now trademark cross-cutting technique that weaves temporal threads in a progressively tighter way, Nolan makes his audience hyper aware of time. *Dunkirk* famously “sculpts” time from a trio of time lumps of varying sizes (one week on land, one day at sea, one hour in the air). *Interstellar*’s characters visit planets where one hour equals seven years on earth. The temporal spans of *Inception*’s dream layers vary from days to weeks to years, depending on how deeply the dream is layered within other dreams.

Is it confusing? Yes. But it’s thrilling to watch, because when time is the plaything of a creative director like Nolan, it feels almost conquerable.

## Eternal Creatures, Restless in Time

Almost—but not quite. Nolan knows that “conquering time” is only something cinema can simulate; an illusion like “the transported man” trick that figures prominently in *The Prestige*. It is not real life. But for Nolan, cinema’s simulacrum is perhaps the best weapon

to fight back against time, his way of heeding Thomas’s call to “rage, rage, against the dying of the light.” As one critic observed: “Nolan revolts against temporal reality, and film is his weapon, his tool... He devises and engineers filmic structures that emphasize time’s crunch while also providing a means of escape.”<sup>42</sup>

For Nolan, time is an existential straitjacket and we are all Houdinis. Can we pick the lock? Is there a way out? The urgent pacing of his films—amplified by musical scores that invoke ticking clocks and other tricks, like the Shepard tone, to convey perpetual escalation—communicates the grave seriousness of the stakes. Time is running out on all of us. Death will come to us all. What can be done? How then shall we live?

Nolan is preoccupied with these questions, wrestling with and raging against them to bravura effect in his films. He is clearly unsettled by the fact that humans are so unsettled by time. If there is nothing else, if immanence is ultimate, why are we so haunted by time? If it is just part of the natural order, why does it feel so unnatural? In his films, Nolan relishes the ability to make time answer to *him*. But he knows that he, and we, must ultimately answer to time. There is no magic, no sleight of hand, that can cheat death and escape time.

And yet we wish there were. We flock in droves to movies because they offer glimpses of the magic we instinctively know exists, even if we deny it in theory. In their time-conquering temporal trickery, films awaken something within us we often suppress: eternity, placed in our hearts by God (Ecclesiastes 3:11). The tension Nolan feels, the wrestle within his and every human heart, is that of an eternity-bound being sitting uncomfortably in time.

Perhaps Nolan will one day recognize this. Perhaps he will come to believe that the pesky feelings of unsettledness within the confines of time are proof of something more, hints of a higher, deeper, realer magic. As C.S. Lewis famously said, “If I find in myself a desire which no

<sup>42</sup> Chad Betz, “Christopher Nolan’s War on Time,” *Paste* (July 30, 2017): <https://www.pastemagazine.com/articles/2017/07/christopher-nolans-war-on-time.html>

experience in this world can satisfy, the most probable explanation is that I was made for another world.”

That doesn't mean this world is not a source of wonder and fodder for cinematic marvel. It is, as Nolan's films beautifully show. It's just to suggest that sometimes the most magical thing about immanence is that it sparks within us an uncanny longing for *transcendence*—a whisper, an inkling, a flickering pixel suspicion that there must be something more. •

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# “The Spirit does not minister anything else but Christ”: Kevin Vanhoozer on Pastor-Theologians, Doctrine, and Cultural Literacy

## EDITOR'S NOTE

The following is excerpted from an interview conducted by Owen Strachan with Dr. Kevin Vanhoozer following Vanhoozer's Scudder Lectures in Public Theology given for the Center for Public Theology at Midwestern Seminary in September 2016.

OS

**I want to frame our time in terms of current evangelical discussions regarding formation. Some have pushed against the idea that intellectual formation takes priority and precedence for Christians or for human beings in general. Certainly habits are an important part of what makes us people and what makes us believers more specifically. Could you comment on the discussion and talk about how intellectual formation has at least a key role in personal formation?**

KV

I don't want to form simply parts of people; we're whole beings and I think wisdom is holistic as well. Wisdom includes character as well as knowledge. With my doctoral students in particular, though I am teaching them and preparing them to be scholars, we actually spend a fair amount of time on, not only intellectual formation, but what I would call “intellectual virtue” formation.

Moral virtues are habits that form character and make one a good person. Aristotle wrote about moral virtues and there is a long history there. However, in scholarship, we also need to talk about the “intellectual virtues.” You can get into habits of thinking, especially when you're writing. Unfortunately, the examples that are easiest to

think of are intellectual vices. I want students to learn certain habits of learning. For example, the virtue of the mind is more likely to lead you to the truth, than away from it. It's a habit of thought that is more likely to lead you to the truth. An example: paying attention or attentiveness. You are more likely to get to the truth as a scholar if you are an attentive person. This is not a technique or a shortcut; it's a personal quality. Are you an attentive person? Are you patient? If not, you might make a hasty generalization. That is a logical fallacy.

I care very much about not only teaching my students facts and theory and having them be able to repeat it back to me, but teaching them how to think and how thinking is an activity that can be done virtuously or not-so-virtuously. The besetting sin in the academy, and where the most formation is needed, has to do with intellectual pride. The only doctoral students I have ever supervised who have come to grief are the ones who did not need my supervision. They were so sure they were right and did not listen to criticism. I see this all the time.

This is why Augustine is my favorite theologian. He wrote a whole book rehearsing his mistakes, *The Retractions*. He wrote a whole book pointing out everywhere he was right and said where he thought he was wrong. How many scholars do you know that publish works about their mistakes? The virtue of the

mind that this exemplifies is humility. Humility is the opposite of pride. If you are a proud person, it is a character flaw, not just because it is immoral or not like Christ. But it is going to lead you in an intellectual direction you do not want to go. Pride is an intellectual vice. Impatience is an intellectual vice. Carelessness is an intellectual vice. You begin to think about the intellectual virtues of humility, patience, carefulness, and they begin to sound suspiciously like the fruit of the Spirit, which, to me, is wonderful. This addresses the question of formation.

I am not interested in just producing “know-it-alls.” I want my students to be witnesses in the way they do scholarship, not just in the scholarship they produce. This is a hard task. It is much harder to learn humility than it is to learn different theories about the atonement. You can get a chart to learn that, but you cannot learn humility with a chart. ... It is hard and will take time. It is connected to formation, but we are talking simply about habits of scholarship. I do think there is a virtuous or vicious dimension to the way we do scholarship as persons. If I speak with conviction, it is because when I was younger, I had to root out bad habits. I was guilty of certain bad habits that made me a worse scholar.

Another aspect is fear. Fear in the academy will do you in. Fear of being thought wrong or of being thought silly. I would rather be willing to be a fool for Christ in the academy, otherwise my witness is going to be compromised. I have had that voice in my ear, “Maybe if you just compromise here, you will gain a footing in the academy. Then you’ll be better perched to witness.” The problem is: you never get far enough. You will keep telling yourself the same story. “If I just compromise a little more, then I will become President of the Society of Biblical Literature. Then I can say what I really think.” By then, it is too late. Not compromising on truth is also a virtue issue.



**Forming whole people, the imagination produces a whole person. What you are saying fits perfectly. I remember you discussing the intellectual virtues while I was a student at TEDS. One virtue you discussed was that of charity, which is**

**often one of the first virtues to go out the window or perhaps never be exercised at all in academic disputation, to judge someone guilty before a response. It is common and it often comes back to mind when I am trying to interact with a view or presenting in class. Critique, yes...be bold and be clear, as you say, but exercise charity whenever possible. Certainly habits are an important part of what makes us people and what makes us believers more specifically. Could you comment on the discussion and talk about how intellectual formation has at least a key role in personal formation?**



This is an important point because I do want to argue with positions and I want to call out what I think is falsehood, but I think it is extremely important that we read people with whom we disagree as charitably as possible to begin with. Only then can you read them as critically as possible. You have to read them as charitably as possible, first. That is simply the “Golden Rule” translated into the realm of academics. Read others’ works the way you would have them read yours. Review others’ books the way you would have them review yours. That hits close to home. I have reviewed books and have had people review me and I would rather have someone abiding by the “Golden Rule” to review my books.



**That makes two of us. Now we’ve learned a bit of your background. Can you trace how you came to be a theologian? Was there an existential wrestling with the two roles of pastor and theologian? What was the journey like for you?**



It started with biblical studies. I wanted to be like my mentor who was a New Testament scholar and he discerned something in me that I did not know myself. He encouraged me to do systematic theology instead, mostly in those days due to supply-and-demand. There was a lack of systematic theologians. What did he see? I have often wondered about that. I think he saw the fact that I like big pictures and a thirst for understanding. Anselm defines theology

as the “search for understanding.” As far as the pastor-theologian, it is simply harder being a pastor than a theologian. I think I am a theologian because I might have been a little cowardly at one stage. I do think one can exercise pastoral ministry in the classroom. We are not officially a church of course, but I take very seriously teacher-student relationships as a pastoral aspect. We’re nurturing not only minds, but character and whole persons. I have wondered about it, but feel I have such a wonderful vocation where I am that it would take something dramatic to get me to do it, but I have thought about it.

**OS** **Thank you for that. Now, regarding the theater, what works of the theater do you particularly enjoy and commend to students who do not have a background in it? How can future pastors enrich their own cultural imagination through some engagement with theater?**

**KV** If you’ve never seen a Shakespeare play, take a look at him. There has been a lot written about his own faith because he often writes about bishops and they are usually not-so-positively portrayed. Sometimes he writes about friars or other lower clergy and they are better portrayed. There has been a lively discussion about whether he was Roman Catholic or Protestant or simply playing a game, but beyond that, Shakespeare’s tragedies are very profound works with insight into the human condition. King Lear and struggles about aging and family, the meaning of life, whether there is a God. Just recently I saw *The Merchant of Venice*. I was writing at the time the chapter on atonement for the *Oxford Handbook of Reformed Theology*. If you know the story of The Merchant of Venice, it is about a Jew in Venice who lends money to a Christian, but says that in return, if the person can’t repay the debt, the Jewish merchant wants a pound of his flesh. The plot continues and he is not able to pay the debt. The merchant of Venice then has a legal right to a pound of his flesh. There is a lot going on in the story – justice, mercy, Christian, Jew. This is a play you need to be aware of and it can be staged in different

ways. It can be staged as it was in Shakespeare’s time, in a historically appropriate moment, or it can be staged in our time. Then it becomes alive and we see that our society is still wrestling with some of these issues. That is why the theater is so powerful. It is story-made-flesh and made present.

**OS** **That has been a theme of your writing. One of the concepts you are known for is “theo-drama.” Could you give us a bite-sized understanding of what you mean by this concept?**

**KV** Theo-drama is an attempt to make the form of my theology conform to the subject-matter of theology. Christianity is not a system of ideas. It is not a moral system. So, what is it? It is an action; it is news of what God has done. The Greek word “draō” means “I do.” So, “theo-drama” simply means “God doing.” Christianity is about God doing. It is about God sending his Son, God creating and redeeming. I would argue the essence of Christianity is this drama of God. God is not representing a story outside himself. What we see happening in history is a dramatic enactment of how God is in eternity. God is eternally Father, Son, and Spirit. What we see acted out in history is a dramatic rendering in history of the way God is in eternity. On a couple of levels, drama is powerful and comes very close to the essence of what is actually going on. The gospel is news that God has acted and that is dramatic.

**AUDIENCE QUESTION** **You have mentioned there is danger in that we can use our imagination to create something that does not honor and glorify God. How does imagination relate to improvisation in terms of not only ministry, but also in helping our people improvise?**

**KV** I have actually changed my mind on this topic. When I first started thinking about drama, I thought of Scripture as our “script” and we have to stick with the script. I thought I was going to be negative about improvisation, but I began reading and learning



about what it is. The thing about improvisation is that it is highly disciplined. Improvisation is not just off-the-cuff doing something. An improviser is trained to respond to the situation in such a way that you keep the action going. Whatever scene you are playing out, you participate in it, keep it going, and build on it. That is a real skill and it has a lot of connections to the life of the disciple. For example, when I talk about Philemon, you can think about improvisation. Paul is asking Philemon to improvise discipleship in his encounter with the runaway slave. Paul says, "I'm not going to command you to do this, but I want you to refresh my heart." That sounds like he is expecting Philemon to know what to do spontaneously because it results from Philemon's renewed, regenerated nature. Improvisation is about acting from reflex with all your antennae up, very attentive to what is happening so you act fittingly from reflex or second nature. It is from regenerate nature. If we can act from second nature, our regenerate nature, we will be improvisers in the best sense.

The Holy Spirit trains us. We have to learn the reflexes of the Spirit as it were. The Spirit is a Spirit of improvisation, but these are always improvisations on a theme and the theme is Jesus Christ. The Spirit does not minister anything else but Christ. It is all improvisation, but is always improvisation on a theme, the Son of God.

#### AUDIENCE QUESTION

**You have said culture is in the business of cultivating the spiritual life. The primary way you are dealing with that concerns the cognitive story culture is telling, the "big picture." As I think about how culture shapes the Christian life, I think it does so cognitively and explicitly, but also subversively. Could you speak to what the pastor's role is in that area as well?**

KV

Culture can shape our spirits and thinking cognitively, but that might be the exception. Culture does not often come out with a thesis statement; the curriculum is almost always hidden, subterranean. It is subtle. Marketing is the easiest

example I can think of. There is a department near Silicon Valley studying how to manipulate us into checking apps on our iPhones as frequently as possible. There are psychologists, sociologists, and engineers involved. It is successful. They create a sense of need – we just have to check. We are waiting for the next big thing. If you ever look at CNN, you will notice they have been putting countdown to things. There is always a countdown to the next primary, the next debate. Why is there a countdown? It's not like it is for rockets to the moon. They are trying to create this sense that our attention needs to be on them. It is happening all over the place.

We need to have our eyes open to the fact that there are a lot of powerful forces, usually with money involved, trying to manipulate us into purchasing or doing things that involve spending money. I do not think that culture is all evil; I do not want to suggest that. There are films that stand up for good values and so on. I go to plays and read books all the time. Partly what I am doing is trying to understand what is going on, trying to understand the messages that are being sent subliminally. When I was growing up, an individual read the evening news. There was a sense that this was an authoritative voice. It has been a long time since I have seen an individual newscaster. There is almost always a panel now of people who represent different viewpoints. Maybe there is some good to that, but it is almost a necessity now. Something is being lost.

Preachers seem to be the only people who get to have an uninterrupted talk at someone and it is just a matter of time before there are two or three people up front, giving different perspectives on the text. There are dialogical modes of preaching that are being experimented with and panels with ESPN and other venues, panels of "experts." It says something about the authority structure of our society. We do not expect a single voice to speak with authority anymore. It is very subtle. ESPN, really? Critique of biblical authority? I am not a conspiracist, but I see subterranean patterns and I am trying to think through these things. A lot of it deals with subliminal, not explicit, messages. If it were explicit, we could easily call it out for what it is.

Another example is how families are represented in our culture. We used to know what a family was—mother, father, some children. If you look only a television shows today—sitcoms, dramas—you will not be able to find what a family is. We are now all used to it. We call them “non-traditional” or “blended” families. Somehow the picture of what a family is has been affected, even for Christians. It does not mean we approve certain kinds of behaviors, but our spirits have been desensitized or numbed by this constant subliminal message – “Here is what families are. Here is what families are about.”

The thing we can do to help our congregations is simply try to make them culturally literate. Marshall McLuhan said, “All television is educational television; the only question is ‘What is it teaching and how?’” If you tell your congregation that, they might listen more carefully. I have made comparisons to teaching critical thinking. If you tell people, “You know, there are mistakes you can make in thinking. They are called fallacies and you should not do them.” You give people a few fallacies and they will come back and say, “I saw someone do that.” They are now aware of them. They have names. Once you give it a name, people will begin to see it.

You can start with two PBS videos I highly recommend, one called *Merchants of Cool*, a Frontline documentary which studies how “cool” is marketed in our society. There are people who studied “cool.” It is interesting because “cool” changes so fast. How do you study cool, how do you sell it? That would be a fascinating video for a church to watch. It does not require advanced degrees to understand the content. The other video is called *The Persuaders*. It is about marketing techniques. They interview people on Madison Avenue with big institutions that market products. It is a fascinating insight into how you are manipulated, addressed, or massaged into thinking and doing certain things by these marketing techniques.

Persuasion is an ancient art; it is rhetoric. What we are seeing are very subtle forms of rhetoric and we have not been trained. In the ancient world, everyone studied rhetoric and we do not. We are easy to pick off;

we do not really know what is happening. The church has nothing to lose but everything to gain in helping congregations become literate with regard to Scripture, culture, and the theological tradition. •

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# On Having a Large Family in an Age of Childlessness

By David Talcott

**In** AUGUST OF 2013 *Time* magazine ran a special on “The Childfree Life.” The author interviewed the increasing numbers of people voluntarily and intentionally choosing to live a life without children. Children, it is thought, are a hindrance to human flourishing. These folks have trips to go on, places to see, restaurants to dine in, adventures to have, things to accomplish. *Children are nice, went the line, but they’re not for me and certainly not for right now.*

Our overall fertility situation tells a similar story. One estimate in the United Kingdom is that 17% of women will never have children, nearly 50% higher than the previous generation. Our total fertility rate in America has been below replacement level for nearly two generations now. If trends hold, then apart from immigration the next generation of Americans will be 16% smaller than the current one. We’re not quite attempting a childfree society, but we’re riding dangerously close to the edge.

There are other signs of distress. Opioid addiction is through the roof. Mental health problems and suicides are on the rise. No one thinks the hookup culture is healthy—men and women alike are unsatisfied with romance today. Indeed, the relational dysfunction of pornography and divorce are tearing families apart. Even things which we thought would bring us happiness aren’t. As women have become more “equal” to men in society, they’ve become unhappier than they used to be. This finding is well-documented and puzzles social scientists to no end. What has happened to us and what are we doing to ourselves? What has happened to our families—the places where we are supposed to learn how to love and live in this world that God has made?

## The End of the Large Family

One of the biggest casualties of America’s slow demographic decline is the large family. My wife and I never set out to have 6 children by the age of 31. We got married young (two months before our 21st birthdays), moved to the Midwest, started grad school, and began having kids far sooner than we planned. But, early fertility turned out to be a wonderful, providential gift. God alone knows what foolish things we would have done with our time and money if our twenties had been childfree. No doubt our lives would have been filled with foodie restaurants, city lofts, and fancy gadgets. Instead it was diapers, dishes, and not enough money to pay babysitters. We were fortunate to be in a church community with other young families, and leaders with a vision for intergenerational faithfulness to God’s original means of filling the earth with His image: procreative fruitfulness of husband and wife. We were fortunate to have financial support from parents who eased the burden during grad school, keeping us from financial disaster.

We now live in New Jersey, where quite a few folks remember the large families of the past. I regularly meet people from an older generation who recall those Irish-Catholic families with 8 or 10 kids. At our church, there’s a wonderful older woman who is one of 8 children. But those are only memories. As one song says, “Those days are gone, their names are lost / Their stories left untold.”

East coast residents experience this loss differently. When we lived in the midwest, our large family was generally an annoyance to the community around us—they’d have to wait at the Wal-Mart door while we herded our flock into the building. Children tend to get in the way of whatever else adults would like to be doing. We got a lot of irritable remarks: “Oh, you’ve got your hands full” or “You know where those come from, right?” When we moved to the east coast, however, the reactions changed. I’m not sure if there was some kind of training session for this, but somehow everyone responds the same way when they find out our family size. After trying to suppress their surprise they all say: “Oh, God bless you.” It’s gracious, at a deep level. But it comes from a place of despair. The midwesterners can

still imagine their life in ours, and they don't want the trouble of it.

To our east coast neighbors we are like an envoy from an alien world. We're a messenger from their distant past, one they still cherish, and would love to participate in, but which is wholly inaccessible to them. People have nostalgia for the big families of the past, but they think they're impossible today. Given today's "normal" American life, it is impossible.

## The Meaning of Large Families

Of course, not all of us are called to have large families, but it is a loss to our culture when they disappear. Each vocation witnesses to different truths. Single people witness to the truth that no human relationship in this life can satisfy the deepest needs of our soul. We are destined for an ultimate union with God, in the next life, and until then we remain incomplete. The infertile remind us that all is not as it should be. God created the world for love, joy, and fruitfulness. Yet, all is not right. We long for the day when God makes all things new and unites all of us together in love. But we're pilgrims on journey toward *that place*. We're not there yet.

Large families witness to the unconquerable power of love. Love is fruitful, it flows out, it expands. God created the world out of love and we, too, are destined to share in His love. In a large family, you learn that everyone is welcome—that more really do make merrier. You learn that life is not about you. You're expendable, and the family has a bigger, grander purpose than just making you happy. At the same time, you learn everyone has their own gifts they contribute to the whole. You are unique, and you bring your talents to the table in a way that's different from everyone else. Everybody has a place at a big table.

## The Future of Christian Marriage

When it comes to marriage and fertility the church is mirroring cultural trends rather than fighting against them. University of Texas sociologist Mark Regnerus is writing a book entitled *The Future of Christian Marriage*. In a recent podcast he explained how when he started his research he hoped to find that the church would be strongly resisting cultural marriage trends. His mentor,

sociologist Christian Smith, argued years ago that the church is "embattled but thriving" across a range of social factors – Regnerus hoped that this would prove true when it comes to marriage and family.

But, as he looks into it he's finding that it just isn't the case. Sometimes, strong minorities can indeed buck the trend. Hassidic Jews in New York City, for instance, have formed a very strong counterculture which exerts a powerful influence on their families. The average Orthodox Jewish woman has 4 children—more than twice as many as the surrounding culture. But Regnerus tells us that the Christian church isn't following suit. Rather than being a bastion of resistance in a decadent culture, churches generally follow the trendlines of what surrounds them. The church and the surrounding culture form one common "moral community." The trends are slightly moderated in the church, but they're fundamentally there. Some churches are bucking the trend, but they are the exception to the rule. The fertility numbers don't lie.

And yet, among created things, marriage is the most permanent. Unstable social trends should not distract us from the unchanging reality and ever-present energy of the marriage relationship. Its origins are as old as time, being inaugurated in the garden as a sign of the relationship between God and His creation. The fertile, one-flesh union of male and female points forward toward the ultimate reunion of heaven and earth when Christ finally returns. Until God becomes unfaithful, which can never be, marriage, and the children it produces, will remain with us as a sign of His unchanging, unconquerable love. •

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# God's Call to Excellence

By Andreas J. Köstenberger

E

xcellence is a strangely neglected topic in Christian circles. When was the last time you heard someone talk about excellence? Why is this topic neglected? I'll suggest a few possible reasons below. For now, let me state my thesis: God has called every one of us to excellence, defined as being a person of integrity who is doing their work competently and with distinction (the Latin root of excellence means "to stand out"). Yet *defining* excellence is not the main problem: we all know excellence when we see it. Rather, the problem is that we often don't *pursue* excellence or for a variety of reasons think excellence is unattainable.

Too often, we focus on *doing* and neglect *being*. But doing is *rooted* in being! Jesus asked, "Can a bad tree bear good fruit?" In his ministry, both his words and his actions inexorably flowed from who he was. Time and again, the Gospels demonstrate that Jesus' miracles, as well as his teachings, as stunning and sublime as they were in and of themselves, were grounded in his (divine) identity. Therefore, when I discuss excellence in my book *Excellence: The Character of God and the Pursuit of Scholarly Virtue*, I start with chapters on holiness and spirituality before turning to a discussion of specific virtues.

When writing about excellence, I do so as a matter of aspiration. As legendary football coach Vince Lombardi famously remarked, "Perfect is not attainable; but if we chase perfection, we can catch excellence." Aspirations are very powerful. Jesus urged, "Therefore, be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect." (Matt. 5:48). And the apostle Paul wrote, "Not that I've already obtained all this ..., but one thing I do: I press on toward the goal ... for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus" (Phil. 3:12-14).

Unattainable as it may seem, therefore, aspire to excellence, both in your personal character (who you are) and in your work (what you do), just as God is excellent in both his character and in all his works.

## Why Write on Excellence?

My work on excellence has been motivated by various factors:

- 1. Reading.** Years ago, soon after my conversion, I read *Addicted to Mediocrity* by Frankie Schaeffer (son of Francis, the famous apologist), who rightly observed and lamented that Christians are not known for their excellence (he particularly singled out Christians in the arts). Why is this the case? This question has occupied me for some time. If God is characterized by excellence, and we've been created in his image and called to glorify him, why would we as Christ's followers not want to be known for excellence and engage in the pursuit of it?

As a business student, I also read the leadership classic *In Pursuit of Excellence* by Tom Peters, and then *From Good to Great* by Jim Collins. Later, during my seminary studies, it occurred to me that excellence is relevant not only in the business world but in the life of the Christian as well. Then, in seminary, I read *Between Faith & Criticism* by the eminent church historian Mark Noll. As Noll makes clear, evangelical scholarship since the 1950s has come a long way. In fact, it has come even farther since Noll published his book over a quarter-century ago.

As a teacher, in equipping evangelical students for academic work, I've used scholarly biographies such as *A Place at the Table* on the life of George Eldon Ladd: a great scholar (in fact, many consider him to be the preeminent evangelical scholar of his generation), but lacking as a father, husband, and churchman. Deeply stung by a negative review of his work, he started drinking. A closer look at Ladd's personal life reveals some sobering lessons for those of us who are committed to the pursuit of serious evangelical scholarship.



2. **Quest for my own identity.** My ongoing quest to refine my understanding of my own identity contributed to my interest in excellence as well. As a result, I asked myself the question: What does it mean for me to be a *Christian* scholar? How is that different from being a *non-Christian* academic? And is the pursuit or excellence part of my personal as well as vocational calling? How can I glorify God in my work as a scholar and witness to him, especially in the academy which is populated significantly by unbelievers? Could excellence be the key?

Consider the odds Christian scholars are up against. In a Forum sponsored by the Society of Biblical Literature (SBL), former president Michael Fox vigorously contended that, properly understood, faith and scholarship cannot coexist. Instead, Fox promoted the ideal (some might say “myth”) of neutral, scientific, unbiased scholarship. According to Fox, faith equals bias. “Confessional” scholarship is really no scholarship at all. I disagree; we can be passionate about a given subject and still treat it fairly; in fact, our passion may fuel a genuine quest for truth.

3. **Survey of the market regarding books on excellence.** As I surveyed the market to see how the topic of excellence is typically treated, I discovered that most books covering excellence are anthologies of quotes by famous people, whether celebrities, philosophers, poets, thinkers, or others. Other contributions feature humanistic success stories, often with a veneer of religion or ethics by the likes of Dale Carnegie (*How to Win Friends and Influence People*), Robert Schuller (*Power Thoughts*), Joel Osteen (*Your Best Life Now*), or Donald Trump (*The Art of the Deal*).

## What Does a Christian View of Excellence Look Like?

Having surveyed the market on the topic of excellence, I asked myself the question: What would a *Christian* view of excellence look like? I concluded that a Christian view of excellence must be grounded in the character of God and in our creation in his image. God is the epitome of excellence. He is excellent in his character and in everything he does, whether in creation or salvation.

Such a call to excellence grounded in the character of God is consistent with Owen Strachan’s call for “big God theology.” Standard systematic theology treatments by Wayne Grudem and Millard Erickson, likewise, speak of the magnificence of God, the holiness of God, and occasionally of his excellence. Matthew Barrett’s new book, *None Greater*, likewise speaks eloquently about the incomprehensibility and excellence of God.

But what about the *Bible*? The Greek word for “excellence” is *arētē*, which occurs five times in the New Testament. The only instance in Paul’s writings lists excellence as part of a series of virtues: “Whatever is true, whatever is noble, ... if anything is excellent or praiseworthy, think about such things” (Phil. 4:8). In this way, believers are urged to emulate what they’ve observed Paul practice in his own life.

The remaining four instances are all in Peter’s writings. In his first letter, he writes that we’re “to proclaim the praises (lit., excellencies) of God who has called us out of darkness into his marvelous light” (1 Pet. 2:9; cf. Is. 43:20–21). In his second letter, he writes that God’s “divine power has granted to us everything pertaining to life and godliness, through the true knowledge of Him who called us by His own glory and excellence.” He continues, “Now for this very reason also, applying all diligence, in your faith supply moral excellence, and in your moral excellence, knowledge ...” (2 Pet. 1:3, 5). Again, excellence is part of a list of virtues believers are to pursue.

What we see in this passage has the potential to be truly life-changing if taken to heart and acted upon: (1) Our relationship with God through Jesus Christ equips us to pursue a godly life. (2) We’re called by God’s own glory and excellence (v. 3). (3) We’re the recipients of God’s precious promises and partakers of the divine nature through God’s Spirit, having escaped the world’s lust and corruption (v. 4). (4) We’re to make every effort to pursue a series of Christian virtues, the foremost being moral excellence; in this way, we must “supplement our faith” (v. 5).

At this, Peter lists a veritable staircase of seven such virtues, not unlike Greco-Roman virtue catalogues (cf. Paul’s sevenfold fruit of the Spirit): moral excellence, knowledge, self-control, perseverance, godliness,

brotherly kindness, and love (vv. 5–7). He adds that if anyone grows in these virtues, they'll be neither useless nor unfruitful in their knowledge of the Lord Jesus Christ (v. 8). If we fail to pursue them, on the other hand, we'll be blind and short-sighted, having forgotten our purification from our former sins (v. 9). If we pursue them, we'll confirm our calling and election, and entrance into the eternal kingdom of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ will be amply supplied (vv. 10–11).

Every Christian is called to the pursuit of excellence. This is not a *salvation* truth but a *sanctification* and *discipleship* truth! In our own lives, as well as in our mentoring, and as we disciple others, is the concept of growing in Christian virtues sufficiently on our radar? As Jesus said, “By this is my Father glorified, *that you bear much fruit*, and so prove to be my disciples .... You didn't choose me, but I chose you, and appointed you, *that you should go and bear fruit*, and that your fruit should remain” (John 15:8, 16). In the Christian life, maturity is not optional; it is expected.

## Then Why Aren't We Doing It?

If every Christian is called to pursue excellence, then why don't we hear more about this, and why are so few believers engaged in the pursuit of excellence? I believe that there are several possible reasons (though I can only list the responses briefly below; see 2 Pet. 1:3–11):

1. **We think excellence is for the select few.** No; excellence is for everyone.
2. **We think excellence is unattainable.** No; excellence is attainable if we focus and aim to do a few things well.
3. **We think excellence is self-effort.** No; Scripture presents the pursuit of excellence as grace-based and Spirit-empowered.
4. **We think excellence is perfectionism.** No; a biblical pursuit of excellence means striving to maximize our created potential with God's help in order to glorify God.

## Final Call to Excellence

Embrace excellence as an overarching, all-encompassing

pursuit! Let me challenge you to:

- Pursue excellence as a person
- Pursue excellence as a husband
- Pursue excellence as a father or mother
- Encourage your children to pursue excellence in their character and in everything they do (see my book, *Equipping for Life: A Guide for New, Aspiring & Struggling Parents*)
- Pursue excellence as a student
- Pursue excellence as a scholar
- Pursue excellence as a servant of Christ

In my book on *Excellence*, I divide excellence into three realms: moral, vocational, and relational. I also talk about Christian virtues such as diligence, fidelity, creativity, eloquence, interdependence, and love. If you're interested in this subject (and you should be!), please get a copy of my book on excellence and work through it thoroughly.

Finally, realize that Christians don't have the luxury to pick one or two out of the three categories of virtue; we must pursue all three kinds of excellence. We can all think of examples of famous athletes, movie stars, or other celebrities who excel in vocational excellence but have failed in the moral realm. Even our culture, at least in principle, upholds the joint ideal of moral, vocational, and relational excellence.

## A Few Practical Tips

So, what does excellence look like? And how is it achieved? Let me close with a seven practical suggestions of my own:

- Streamline, whittle down, simplify, prioritize, and, above all, learn to say no!
- Do a few things well, learn to focus.
- Determine your unique personal calling and pursue it.

- Be yourself; assess your strengths and weaknesses; then maximize your strengths and minimize your weaknesses.
- Don't duplicate the efforts of others; if someone else can do the job, let them do it!
- Don't succumb to the tyranny of the urgent (see Charles Hummel's booklet by that title).
- Plan: as the old adage goes, if you fail to plan, you plan to fail. •

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# Truth with Grace: Re-Centering God and De-Centering Self Within the Public Square

By Bruce Ashford

## EDITOR'S NOTE

*The following is excerpted from Dr. Ashford's Scudder Lectures in Public Theology given for the Center for Public Theology at Midwestern Seminary in January 2018.)*



## Re-Center God

In our public discourse, it is as if the Christian framework of thought and Christian virtue have never really taken hold. Instead of being witnesses to Christ, we are something like the opposite. We want to be able to re-center God in our desacralized public square, but what does that look like?

We need to find appropriate, compelling ways of calling attention back to the cosmic King. That will not be easy. Every time we utter the words “God,” “Christ,” “sin,” or “salvation,” or promote any biblical concept, our hearers will hear it differently than the way we utter it. They will load it with the freight of their own social and cultural context. To counter this, we will need to take a page out of the playbook of Christian missionaries.

When I was a missionary I learned that I needed to listen sympathetically to people in my cultural context instead of mocking and demeaning them, assuming they were thoroughly reprehensible people, bad and stupid people in whom nothing good could be found. When we approach people on the other side of the political aisle, we will need to listen to them in order to understand them, and then try to speak gospel words in such a way that they might hear and receive them. We should start from common ground to try to persuade, instead of standing at some imagined ascendant height of political power, rebuking people and mocking them. We all have that temptation. I have failed in numerous ways

throughout the course of my life – I have used humor in the wrong way, responded in anger. I am not any better than anyone else; we will need to work together.

## What can we do?

### 1) Recover the Biblical Narrative as the Master Narrative of Human History

The church as a whole, and we as individuals, need to work hard to find ways to show that the biblical narrative, rather than the MSNBC narrative or the CNN narrative or the Fox News narrative, is the true story of the whole world. Augustine in his work, *City of God*, showed the Romans the hubris in their belief that history culminated in the Roman empire and that the Romans were God's people, polytheistically speaking. Augustine showed them in a powerful and compelling way that Rome's history was just a bit-player in the grand sweep of world history. In reality, the Bible's narrative is the master narrative that positions all other narratives. In our nation, we've allowed micro narratives, fashioned by small voices and secular political parties and ideologies to become the major narrative and have unwittingly let the big narrative be subsumed. We need to recover the biblical narrative as the master narrative of human history.

### 2) Identify and Denounce Political Idols

It is a helpful exercise to identify political idols. We can do this by finding the ways perennial idols, i.e. sex,

money, and power, are operative in the public square and seek to address them in a helpful manner. Another angle is to look at the frameworks of the panoply of modern political ideologies and identifying the idol these ideologies tend to worship, asking the question: “What is the thing this ideology ascribes ultimacy instead of God?”

In his book, *Political Visions and Illusions*, David Koyzis does this brilliantly. Every modern political ideology, like every person, tends toward an idol of some sort. Classical liberalism and forms of modern libertarianism tend to ascribe ultimacy to liberty. By “liberty,” they mean unfettered freedom from social, cultural, and moral norms. Social conservatism tends to absolutize cultural heritage, viewing change as evil and finding some golden era of the past to return to. The problem is there is a need for transcendent norms to judge one’s cultural heritage by. Without the Christian faith, social conservatives have to rummage around to find some sort of a transcendent norm.

Social progressivism is the opposite and tends to see the evil in our cultural heritage, sometimes rightly so. It wants to enact grand projects of social reform as a fix and tends to vest these projects with a sort of messianic hope, thinking the social experiment will save us. Usually, the experiments are as bad as the one that came before, and sometimes they are worse. Nationalism elevates the nation-state or, sometimes, an ethnic group within the nation-state to a level of ultimacy, making them superior in some way to everyone else. Soon, injustices arise. Socialism tends to elevate material equality and communal ownership to the level of a god in hopes that these systems will one day save us.

Though you may be mocked for broaching the topic, this is serious stuff. This is what the Bible teaches will happen when humans construct societies – we will corrupt it with idolatry. We have no business thinking we’ll be able to honor the Lord Christ in our nation until we’re willing to confess our idols, even in our own preferred political systems and parties.

### 3) Proclaim Hope in Christ Alone

We need to make clear to our neighbor that our ultimate

allegiance is to Christ, and not to a party, ideology, a messianic political figure, or a platform. It’s not that we can’t be active in supporting candidates; we can and often should. But we should engage in those things in a way that demonstrates the tentativeness of those allegiances in light of our loyalty to Christ. Remember this and don’t forget it: occupants to Caesar’s throne come and go. They always have and they always will. Jesus remains forever.



## e-Center the Self

It’s difficult to re-center God when we are constantly placing ourselves in the center. One good thing about the fact that we have been de-centered by someone else is that we can use the moment to ask God to give us humility. We need to find a way to assume a humble posture in the public square; it’s the only way we’ll stand out above the fray. There are at least two ways we can do this:

### 1) We can seek the good of the city, rather than merely the good of our own tribe.

Identity politics is the death of a democratic republic to the extent that it seeks the good merely or exclusively of its own tribe. As believers in this polarized era, we have to be the people who are seeking the good of everyone, not merely of our own race, economic status, or even our own religion. We should be the first to work on behalf of groups who are financially disadvantaged, ethnically downtrodden, or socially marginalized. From an American perspective, I’m on the political right. The way I approach these things will be different from someone on the left, but the fact remains, I must be doing it. Our love for Christ and our neighbor demands it and a position of political weakness could never restrain it.

### 2) Be concerned not only with the truth content of our moral and political stances, but with our demeanor and disposition in the way we communicate them.

Taking a stance is an especially valuable way to do one of two things: either confirm to our nation that we are nothing more than a hypocritical, bigoted special-interest arm of one major political party or we



can say we most emphatically are not that, but are, instead, a people transformed by Christ. In the middle of this arena, we need to refuse to form in our mind the thoroughly unbiblical belief that everything is the fault of the other side. No one on the other side is thoroughly bad; Satan and his minions are, but no person is beyond redemption. If you allow yourself to think that everyone who is on the wrong side is thoroughly reprehensible, you will be able to quickly justify mocking and demeaning them, failing to give them dignity and respect as human beings, lying about them repeatedly, telling partial truths at best, questioning their motives, and judging their hearts unfairly. We want to have that combination of truth and grace that Jesus displayed. Truth without grace makes you a jerk or bully, to put it kindly. Grace without truth makes us political wimps or a sort of non-entity. But that combination of truth and grace that is brought by conforming ourselves into the image of Christ allows us to get powerful public witness.

### 3) Reframe Divisive Public Issues in Interesting Ways

If we are pledging ultimate allegiance to Christ, and the Bible's narrative is the master narrative through which we are viewing political events in human history, we will be liberated to reframe divisive public issues in ways that are interesting. We can make Christianity interesting again. We can frame issues in ways that do not arise directly from the soil of a secular ideology or from a political party that is framed by secularists. We do not have to, and ought not in certain instances, frame it the way they frame it. Refusing to do so breaks the ability of American society, and especially the media, to classify and dismiss the church as a special-interest group beholden to a particular political party. If we will not reframe issues and the Bible is not the master narrative and we are unable to have a different disposition and demeanor, the press has every right to make these claims. Let's regain the clarity and strength of our voice by viewing politics and public life through the eyes of God's revealed Word and the incarnate Son.



## Revitalizing Culture

In contrast to previous categories, we cannot control whether or not we revitalize culture. We may not be triumphant; we can't transform

culture entirely by bringing in the kingdom of God, but we can operate as obedient witnesses. Occasionally, God allows us some amount of victory. We should seek to revitalize our cultural institutions instead of withdrawing from them, leaving them on their own. God may bless the work of our hands, and even if we do not see visible victory, we get to be a witness and get to be obedient. Christ-centered cultural work is a powerful means of opposing cultural and social decadence. We can accomplish this in two ways:

#### 1.) We need to take the broad view.

Let's not put all our eggs in the basket of politics. Government and politics is only one cultural sphere among many. Let's build a Christian witness in every sphere and encourage our young people to enter into the arts and sciences, higher and lower education, politics and economics, sports and competition, marriage and family. Let's enter in fully as gospel people, and when we do, the cumulative effect of our combined witness could be very powerful. Let's take the broad view.

#### 2.) We need to play the long game.

When we *are* in the political sphere, let's not put all our eggs in the basket of short-term activism. It's okay to work the switchboards for a senator or put some sandwich boards on and walk around. Those are not inherently wrong things to do, but if we limit ourselves to doing only this, we lose the effect of it, muffling our voice. Short-term activism tempts us to sacrifice long-term public witness on the altar of short-term political gain. Let's not do this just to win. God hasn't called us to be winners. Jesus is the only winner and because he wins, we win in the end.

Let's remember Jesus's words in John 20:21, "As the Father sent me, so I send you." God sent the Son in a way that was prophetic, sacrificial, and the Son was humbly confident. We need to approach public life in the same way. We need to approach the public square in a prophetic manner just as Jesus declared that he is Lord and Caesar is not. We must challenge the *cultus publicus* of the American empire. We must challenge anti-Christ ideologies, policy views, and moral views anywhere we

find them, but we must also be sacrificial and humble.

If the cosmic King of the universe could minister as a homeless itinerant teacher whose destiny on this earth was to be disrobed and nailed to a cross to die in public, then we can be willing to live humble, sacrificial lives in the public square. We can be willing to lose. We can be willing to operate from the political margins. We can be humbly confident. As dark as any political moment may seem, we need to remember this one truth: the realm of politics will one day be raised to life and made to bow in humble submission to Christ the King as he gains victory and restores the earth. For that reason, we remain confident and can remain humble. In *Signs Amid the Rubble*, Leslie Newbigin writes:

The point is that [a transformed society] is not our goal, great as that is...Our goal is the holy city, the New Jerusalem, a perfect fellowship in which God reigns in every heart, and His children rejoice together in His love and joy...And though we know that we must grow old and die, that our labors, even if they succeed for a time, will in the end be buried in the dust of time, and that along with the painfully won achievements of goodness, there are mounting seemingly irresistible forces of evil, yet we are not dismayed...We know that these things must be. But we know that as surely as Christ was raised from the dead, so surely shall there be a new heaven and a new earth wherein dwells righteousness. And having this knowledge we ought as Christians to be the heart and strength of every good movement of political and social effort, because we have no need either of blind optimism or of despair.<sup>43</sup>

Our great and certain hope is that the Lord will return. We will meet him first and foremost as Christians, not as Americans. But for citizens of the United States, we will meet him as Americans, too. Our citizenship is not the most important part of our identity, but it is an inescapable part for which we will give account. For

that reason, we owe it to our nation to embrace the call, not to resent it or slouch into withdrawal or charge into angry activism. We should embrace it with humble confidence and faithfulness in a prophetic manner. We are to be a public witness operating from a position of political weakness, choosing to minister from a “tree” just as our Lord once ministered from a tree, only to later reign visibly from a throne. •

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<sup>43</sup> Leslie Newbigin, *Signs Amid the Rubble: The Purposes of God in Human History* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2003), 55.

# Going Dark: The Rise and Significance of Jordan Peterson and the “Intellectual Dark Web”

By Esther O'Reilly



What do a Canadian psychology professor, an American evolutionary biologist, and a British journalist all have in common? Answer: All of them are part of the network known as the “Intellectual Dark Web,” a motley crew of public intellectuals, writers and media creators who took the year of 2018 by storm. Their secret? They are having long, candid dialogues about ideas that matter, then sharing the uncut results for anyone to hear. And the gatekeepers of culture are not happy about it.

Jordan Peterson, Bret Weinstein, and Douglas Murray are just a few of the names that millions of people have gotten to know better as they tune into this rolling conversation. It was Bret’s brother, prodigious mathematician and Thiel Capital manager Eric Weinstein, who jokingly gave the network its dubious title. In practice, they are only “Dark” insofar as they are helping ordinary people think outside the box of institutional media. The twist: most of them are liberal atheists.

## How is this happening?

For conservative Christians, the answer is multifaceted and worth studying. Readers will most readily recognize the name of Jordan Peterson, who won viral fame a year ago in a battle of wits with BBC reporter Cathy Newman. His book *12 Rules for Life* became an overnight hit, and his accompanying lecture tour captured sold-out international audiences. But, as of fall 2016, Peterson had been unsure if he was even going to have a job, let alone worldwide fame.

That summer, the Canadian Parliament introduced new discrimination legislation that made transsexuals a protected class. Noting that “discrimination” included

“misgendering” under the Ontario Human Rights Code, Peterson spoke out and registered his refusal to use “alternate” pronouns such as “ze” or “zir.” After receiving two cease-and-desist orders from his own university, he stood his ground, risking legal sanctions and the possible loss of his professorship. By this simple action, Peterson crossed a line in our brave new cultural landscape.

Douglas Murray calls these lines “tripwires”: booby traps for people who are peacefully going about their lives one day, then wake up the next day to discover they are suddenly the worst kind of bigot. Do you believe there are only two genders and they are inherently different? Do you believe that empathy alone does not form an effective basis for social policy on complicated issues like immigration? Do you believe racial thought-policing is dangerously unhealthy, even if you agree that racism exists? If you answer “Yes” to any of the above, the outrage mob will come for you. As Bret Weinstein discovered, it will even come for a lifelong Democrat.

The Weinstein brothers grew up in deep blue California, as did Bret’s wife, Heather Heying. In 2002, Bret and Heather both began teaching evolutionary biology at Evergreen State College, a self-styled progressive school nestled in the woods of Portland, Oregon. Weinstein’s progressive credentials were sterling. A cousin of Holocaust survivor Eva Kor, he wore his Jewish identity proudly and earned death threats from his college frat for calling out white supremacy. In 2011, he supported the Occupy Wall Street protests. One could hardly picture a less likely target of leftist outrage. Yet, in May 2017, that was exactly what Weinstein became.

The catalyst was a student-imposed “Day of Absence,” where young activists demanded that all white people leave the Evergreen campus. When Weinstein refused, student handlers marched to his office, shouted him down as a racist, and bodily escorted him off campus. For the next few days, they established a state of complete anarchy, rioting, blocking exits, and holding faculty union members hostage while demanding Weinstein’s removal. Worst of all, the administration did nothing to stop it. In a settlement with the school, Weinstein and his wife resigned soon after. Today, they are “professors in exile,” pariahs among their peers.

The corruption of Evergreen was a top-down affair. Over a year before the meltdown, chilling video from Evergreen’s “equity council” meetings shows how the school’s leadership invited radical activist thinkers to shape their new “equity policy.” As these speakers stoke resentment and call for drastic structural change, these meetings take on the character of religious ceremony. White students and faculty are compelled to stand up and “renounce” their privilege (and all its works). One meeting sees them lining up and asking permission to board a make-believe “canoe,” bound for the promised land of equity. Behind them, a PowerPoint screen loops a clip of rough waves crashing on rocks. If you look closely, you can spot Weinstein in the background of every meeting, watching in horror, hoping someone would stand up with him and say something. Nobody else did.

The example of Evergreen College demonstrates that while our culture might have banished God, it has not banished religion. It has merely replaced it with a new type of religion. Before this throne, there is no mercy, no means of washing away the stain of original “sin.” There is only endless judgment, shame and penance. Nobody comes to this god except as a slave.

But what does the Intellectual Dark Web make of *old-time* religion? Several people in the network are ethnically Jewish, from the devoutly practicing Ben Shapiro to the bullish New Atheist Sam Harris. Eric Weinstein sits between them, an avowed naturalist who’s still unable to give up synagogue and Torah reading every Saturday. There are no Christians in the group, although Jordan Peterson has occasionally been mistaken

for one based on his respect for the Bible and archetypal Christian themes. Only Douglas Murray grew up in the Church, de-converting after a painful crisis of faith in his late twenties.

There is, of course, that other old religion: Islam. Ayaan Hirsi Ali and Maajid Nawaz are two ex-Muslim members of the group who now identify as secular humanists. Sam Harris counts them as friends and argues with them that the radical left has betrayed its own liberal values by papering over violent Islamic culture with relativism. He recalls a watershed moment in his own understanding of this phenomenon, when biologist Nita Farahany argued with him that one could not say forcing women to wear burqas is wrong. Attempting to steer her into a *reductio*, he asked whether she would agree that we should condemn a culture that ritually blinded every third child. Without batting an eye, she said, “It would depend on why they’re doing it.” That was the moment when Sam Harris realized he had spent his life fighting old religion, only to encounter new religion in his own backyard. Farahany would go on to join President Obama’s Commission for the Study of Bioethical Issues.

This poses a challenge for Harris: will he welcome the alliance of Christians who are also willing to stand with him against the radical left on one hand and radical Islam on the other? Douglas Murray suggests that he should. He sympathizes with Harris, as a fellow freethinker whose own journalistic work on Islam has nearly cost him his life. But as Douglas impishly points out to his friend in a three-way dialogue with Jordan Peterson, Sam could count his like-minded allies in the secular academy on the fingers of one hand.

For his own part, Murray will shake hands with anyone who’s “good in a fight.” When one conservative Christian friend of mine crossed professional paths with him, they bonded effortlessly over their shared alarm at cultural Marxism and the suppression of free thought. In that moment, it didn’t matter that Murray is an atheist and my friend is a Christian, or that Murray is a homosexual and my friend affirms biblical sexuality. To be sure, in the light of eternity, these things matter immensely. But in these strange times, when it comes to finding like-minded conversation partners, the most significant

dividing line is not the line between faith and no faith. It is the line between good faith and bad faith.

This is the “New New Atheism” that is rising as the sun of New Atheism sets: an atheism willing to admit that devout Jews and Christians are not going anywhere, and this might be a good thing. The “new new atheist” sees religion less like a mind virus and more like the fence in G. K. Chesterton’s parable—something that should not be torn down just because one is unsure why it is there. Indeed, as Murray powerfully argues in his book *The Strange Death of Europe*, we are getting a front-row seat to what happens when a whole continent loses its religious identity. Tear down the fence, create a vacuum of meaning and purpose, and something far worse may rush in to fill the void.

In debate with the “mind virus” man himself, Richard Dawkins, Bret Weinstein has tried to add an evolutionary spin, arguing that religion can be viewed as a helpful biological adaptation. After all, religious people have historically built strong communities, encoded moral wisdom in compelling stories, and raised their children with standards of “clean” living. Sure, their beliefs may be “literally false,” but they’re “metaphorically true.” This echoes the stance Jordan Peterson has taken in debate with Sam Harris, though Peterson is less willing to state outright that Christianity is literally false. Social psychologist Jonathan Haidt has made a similar case in his book *The Righteous Mind*. Say what you will about religion, but at some level, it seems to *work*. And, Weinstein proposes, it just might give culture the push that it needs to “reject our biological programming” before we play out the evolutionary story to self-extinction.

On the one hand, this is certainly a pleasant change of pace from the vitriolic rhetoric of the “Four Horsemen.” Yet Christians might sense a certain condescension in such a peace offering.

Christianity is still viewed as a psycho-evolutionary puzzle to be solved, not as a set of truth claims to be studied on their own terms. Meanwhile, naturalistic evolutionary readings of facts such as gender disparity are seen as the last bastion of scientific objectivity against radical identity politics. Of course, the irony is that, by

insisting on methodological naturalism, these thinkers are denying themselves the most powerful explanatory resource for their own observations about human nature: intelligent design. Men and women are not different because they evolved to be different. They were *created* different. Morality is not a heuristic for social interaction constructed by man through stories and imitative games. It was written on our hearts from the beginning.

Sadly, we Christians must face the fact that we have been almost wholly shut out of the intellectual debate on these questions. It has not been for lack of robust arguments, or able apologists to make them. While the New Atheists may have lost the argument, they won the PR campaign. As a result, even those in the public square who are friendly toward our faith take it for granted that there is no logical basis for it. This is not to discourage apologetic ministry in the church. To the contrary, it is more needed now than ever. But for many a man on many a street, it still comes as news that “rational Christian” is not an oxymoron.

Still, while the Intellectual Dark Web may be beyond our reach for now, they are not beyond the reach of the Holy Spirit. For at least some of its members, questions and hard problems still niggle. The awareness of what is missing still lingers.

Jordan Peterson feels it when he burns with anger at totalitarian horrors, knowing that Darwin cannot help him explain why. He feels it when he weeps over a young woman’s suicide, knowing that no amount of Stoic wisdom can mend her parents’ broken hearts. If we are merely stuff of earth, alone in the universe, where can meaning be found? Is there a final reckoning for the evil we cannot avenge? Is there a final restoration of the things we cannot restore?

Eric Weinstein feels it when other naturalists breezily inform him that there is nothing to fear, that they can still have nice things. “Is there?” he wonders. “Can we?” He feels it when he unravels the mathematical structure of the universe and finds patterns within patterns, dimension upon dimension of grace and beauty. “A communication of pure design,” he calls it. Almost as if it was waiting for him to find it. Almost as if someone were trying to tell him something.



Douglas Murray feels it when he writes about euthanasia and the sanctity of life, wondering if anything is still sacred in an atheist world. He feels it when he meets persecuted Christians in Nigeria—men and women sharing stories of loss, children showing him their bullet wounds. He feels it when he hears them lift their voices in the Sunday worship they still keep, dressed in the finest clothes they still have. “Oh Lord, deliver us!” their prayer goes up. A stirring of old longing, long buried. A glimpse through a darkling glass, of a country not yet seen. “But they’re not attractive victims,” his freethinking friends say. “They’re homophobic,” doesn’t Douglas know? Without him, they will be forgotten. But he will see that they are not.

And so the gay atheist has become the champion of the persecuted church. The psychology professor has become the Bible teacher. The scientists have become religious apologists. Such is the upside-down world in which we now find ourselves. We can choose to respond in one of two ways.

First, we could choose to feel frustrated that it is still not enough. We could lament that millions flock to half-truths while we preach the whole truth to still-empty pews. We could double our marketing teams. We could exhaust ourselves in pursuit of a will-o’-the-wisp we will never catch. Or, second, we can follow the example of the Nigerian Christians. We can embody moral courage. We can live and work with integrity. We can love our families and communities well.

Will we convince everyone watching us that our faith is true? Maybe not. But at the very least, we will make good men want it to be true. •

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# “The gospel addresses all of life”: On Race and Identity

with H.B. Charles, Jr.

## EDITOR'S NOTE

The following is excerpted from a *City of God* interview conducted in November 2018.

**OS** Today I am with H.B. Charles Jr. He is the pastor of Shiloh Metropolitan Baptist Church in Jacksonville, Florida. ... H.B., thank you so much for being with us.

**HB** Thank you for having me, Owen. It's a joy to be with you.

**OS** H.B., I would say you have a “Word-driven” ministry. You're known for standing upon the Word of God. You're known for expository preaching – you have written multiple books on the topic and speak all around the country and all around the globe about it. Why is your ministry so resolutely focused on the Word of God?

**HB** I am committed to Bible-governed, Bible-shaped, Bible-led ministry for several reasons. First, my calling and charge as a pastor is to preach the Word. The first two verses of 2 Timothy 4 build on the last two verses of the previous chapter. The nature, authority, and sufficiency of Scripture is why we preach the Word. In 2 Tim. 4, Paul doesn't just tell Timothy that he must preach; he tells him *what* he must preach. He must preach the Word and he must preach the Word because of *what* the Word is. Any ministry or church that is not rooted in faithful, biblical teaching betrays our lack of confidence in the Word of God.

Secondly, I started as a boy-pastor. I had no authority,

experience, or skill. In my installation message, Dr. E.V. Hill, the late pastor of Mt. Zion Church in Los Angeles, preached a message entitled, “What Can That Boy Tell Me?” In the sermon, he emphasized the sufficiency of Scripture. Kicking off my ministry as a high school senior, I was struck by the fact that truth is truth whether I experience it as such or not.

Thirdly, at this stage I have seen the power of God's work. God doesn't promise to bless our ideas or agendas; he promises to bless his Word. Isaiah 40:8 says, “The grass withers and the flower fades, but the Word of God stands forever.” The authority of God's Word is our authority for ministry. Everything that happens in the church should be an extension of the Word.

**OS** Amen to that, I agree. Your father was a very prominent Los Angeles preacher in the Baptist tradition and African-American church. He had a connection to the Civil Rights movement and had a particular stance on the issue in his day. Can you elaborate on that for us? What did it look like for him to be a biblical preacher in that day in age?

**HB** Sure, we were a part of the National Baptist Convention, made up primarily of African-American congregations and my father was a part of a circle of preachers rallying around the work of Martin Luther King Jr. There was division within the National Baptist Convention – the established leaders

felt the convention should be focused on evangelism, missions, and Christian education, instead of civil rights. When that battle came to a head, a group of young men left and started a new work called the “Progressive National Baptist Convention.” My father joined them and helped establish the Convention in the L.A. area and in the greater California area. He was totally committed to civil rights. There was a sense in which my father, who could rightly be labeled an activist, was committed to helping the community and was concerned about helping meet the needs of the people in the city, but he never brought any of that to the pulpit. Week after week, he preached the Word of God and the testimony of Jesus Christ. He did not try to “read in” cultural issues and make the church an extension of his civil rights work. He viewed those things, I think, as a part of his pastoral assignment – serving the needs of those entrusted to his care, but his ministry was rooted in the Word.

That is the model I grew up. That was the pattern for any of those pastors. I grew up in L.A. where there was a black mayor, Tom Bradley, who would come to the minister’s conference regularly and consult with the pastors. My father was very much engaged, but he understood the work of the church to be disciple-making. He did not stretch that to make the local church a civil rights organization. I never felt the two sides were in tension. They seemed to flow seamlessly in his life and work. That has shaped my understanding of what it means to be a faithful minister.

**OS** Amen. It certainly seems when we look at Scripture and when a text like Ephesians 2:11-19, which I’ve heard you preach on powerfully at the Truth in Love Conference, is preached and the gospel is proclaimed, there is naturally going to be racial reconciliation that takes place. It’s gospel-drive racial reconciliation. It’s what Christ does; he draws Jew and Gentile to his own family. He makes one new man through his blood and brings in both Jew and Gentile into the church. So, there is an organic component to the preaching of the Word – is that accurate?

**HB** Yes, and I am not saying my father dodged issues; that isn’t what I’m commending. I’ve learned from his work to be careful about handcuffing

the gospel to some other, secondary agenda. The gospel addresses all of life, including our relationships. You’re absolutely right. There is a misunderstanding of the gospel if we truly understand that God in Christ has reconciled the world to himself and we have been reconciled to a holy God and then, totally disregard the fact that God, who is holy and we are not, has condescended to be reconciled to us in Christ. Tied directly to that is our relationships with one another. The sign to the watching world of the reconciling power of the gospel is that it makes those who would have nothing to do with each other become brothers and sisters in Christ. That is essential to preach. What you are doing there is fleshing that out through a gospel lens, not a political, social, or cultural lens. That is an important distinction to make.

**OS** I think it’s a very important distinction. In such a divided time and in such a politically frenzied time on all sides here, everything feels political today. Games are political, the National Anthem is political. Everything is political. It’s a beautiful thing when the church is structured around the Word and you can go into that local assembly each week and breathe the fresh oxygen of the Word of God with people with whom you might have nothing else in common, but Christ. That’s what I see in your ministry.

**HB** I recently read *The Compelling Community* by Mark Dever and Jamie Dunlop and they articulated this issue well concerning the nature of the local church. The heart of the book is that there ought to be relationships in our churches that cannot be explained apart from the gospel. It’s not just that the young people enjoy hanging out with each other, where their connection because of their stage of life might be the more compelling bond than Christ. The church ought to be a place where you look around and see young and old, single and married, rich and poor, black and white together and the only way to make sense of these relationships is the gospel of the Lord, Jesus Christ. That is when the church becomes this counter-cultural community, a sign, herald, and foretaste of the present-but-not-yet Kingdom of God in this world. That should shape us as pastors and should shape our understanding of what our work is to be and how we do it.

**OS**

**Yes, and as part of that identity and within that body, I think we can note, there are prophetic elements in our preaching...**

**HB**

In the name of prophetic preaching, I hear guys talk about the importance of speaking “truth to power,” using Jesus as their example. I don’t worry with all of it, but as I am preaching, I am studying and notice Jesus speaking truth to power, except his primary target is hypocritical religionists. He was more concerned about the corruption of those who claim to be God’s people. I think we misunderstand what our assignment is. He didn’t go clean Herod’s palace, he cleansed the temple. In prophetic preaching, the best thing we can do for the world is to let the church be the church and let the world be the world. We can’t make a difference as salt and light unless there is that distinction and that distinction requires gospel-preaching that is, itself, prophetic. It proclaims a “new world order” based upon the finished work of Christ.

**OS**

**I know in your own church in Jacksonville, you have seen this “strangeness.” You have a very diverse group of people who are members and who are following your preaching. You have people in the African-American community and in the black church following your preaching. You have people in the Reformed world, the John MacArthur-influenced world, and beyond following your preaching. That’s a rare thing in our day. What have you seen at Shiloh in terms of this in-gathering as the Word has been preached?**

**HB**

I have much to thank God for as I have seen the progress. God has blessed our labors in Jacksonville. I have to admit as I look at our work, I am burdened and troubled. We have a long way to go; we have not arrived. No church can claim they have. We merged our predominantly black church with a predominantly white church and there were so many points of disagreement about things like ministry programs, musical styles, leadership structures, church traditions, special events, and more. The unifying factor has been the preaching of God’s Word and the testimony of Jesus Christ.

This year God has allowed us to extend the work to the

Spanish-speaking community and I’m grateful for what God is doing there. Aldo Mesa is our Spanish-speaking pastor, or as he calls himself, the “Latin H.B.” (laughter). The bond we share is around the Word of God and the testimony of Jesus Christ. Our unity, our witness, and our strength remain to the degree that we keep the main thing, the main thing. Whenever it shifts to something else, then that fellowship is corrupted and that is true with any topic, not just racial matters, but cross-generationally, etc. I have a colleague who proudly says, “My church is all-millennial.” It’s great that he is reaching millennials; I’m just not sure that’s something to brag about. I think healthy discipleship means young people need to learn to love, live with, and serve with seniors who they might not have a lot in common with except the gospel, and vice-versa. I do not think it is wrong to minister to certain demographics, but that should not be the final identity factor for us.

**OS**

**I agree in full. It’s meaningful to hear both your personal background – that civil rights is not far off from your family, but that your father was, in some ways, an important figure in L.A. and beyond – and then, that in your own church, you have skin in this game. You have seen the gospel and the Word unite. This is a beautiful thing. We just want to be on record as saying this. There are a lot of things to sort out in the public square, a lot of issues to handle that are very complex and deep, and there is real pain. The American past is a very checkered past and, yet, the gospel does unite. People are hungry for the Word and that is what we see in your ministry.**

**HB**

Yes, God uses all kinds of means to sanctify us. Preaching helps keep the church faithful, but often, the church helps keep the preacher faithful. Things happen in the community and I see things in the news, and I feel a certain way about it and have thoughts about it, reactionary impulses and things I want to say. There are footnotes that I want to say to get my thought out there, but God has called me to a place where I am shepherding those from different races and I am constantly reminded as I prepare and think through those things that I, as a shepherd, have no right to dishonor the gospel by putting anything forward that prejudices the hearing of it. I don’t want to say anything on social media,

at conferences, or in my own pulpit that prejudices against the hearing of the gospel because I have another agenda that is, frankly, not as important as the gospel itself.

Related to that, those of different races in my church who I will preach to are my brothers and sisters. We have prayed together, suffered together, served together, worshiped together, and walked alongside one another. It is a sanctifying thing to think through things and not just view it as “those people out there.” I have to think through what it means for people who look like me and my family and for people who do not look like me, those who are from a different background, but who are my family because of our bond in Christ. It forces you to play fairly with some of these issues. There is a principle there that shapes how we, as ministers, think through our work.

**OS** **Social media makes it an interesting day in age because you really can broadcast your thoughts on a minute-by-minute basis. You have a hot-take and can publish it. You have a significant following and others do as well. ... The Spirit is doing work in us in a James 1 sense. H.B., I am very thankful for your ministry. I see that prioritization from afar of that one, new man. Jesus has literally made a new humanity by his blood. There is, effectively, a new human race constituted in the second Adam. We cannot lose sight of that today, even though we are tempted to on every side.**

**HB** Absolutely. And on every side, we are blessed by technology and it is a good tool, but we must guard against becoming handcuffed by it in such a way that we are led away from the gospel. I try to remember that everything Scripture says about my stewardship of speech applies to everything I tweet.

**OS** **Amen. H.B., I'm thankful for you joining us and for your ministry. God bless you, brother.**

**HB** Thank you for the opportunity and for your friendship. •

*H. B. Charles, Jr. is the Pastor-Teacher at the Shiloh Metropolitan Baptist Church of Jacksonville and Orange Park, Florida. He is the author of several books, including On Preaching and On Pastoring, and is Senior Preaching Fellow of the Spurgeon Library at MBTS.*



# Your Prosperity is Too Small: The False Promises of Health-and-Wealth Religion

By Costi W. Hinn



here was a rich young ruler who once had the opportunity to sit face-to-face with God. Like a child humbly seated at the feet of his father, this ruler had a question and knew where to go for the answer. Surely God Himself could provide an adequate solution to his longing soul. In an instant, a weighty inquiry burst forth. He asked, “What shall I do to inherit eternal life?” On the outside, this rich ruler appeared to be a cut above everyone else. He was wealthy, powerful, and seemed to be a model of morality. Eternal security was all but guaranteed, right? But there, concerning the state of the ruler’s soul, Jesus brought the sobering reality of heaven down to earth.

Jesus said, “One thing you still lack. Sell all that you possess and distribute it to the poor, and you shall have treasure in heaven; and come follow Me” (Luke 18:22). The ruler’s response? “But when he had heard these things, he became very sad, for he was extremely rich. And Jesus looked him and said, ‘How difficult it is for those who are wealthy to enter the kingdom of God!’” (Luke 18:24).

Wealth is not a sin, but chasing it can cloud even the sharpest of minds. That is why in God’s economy, it is not the balance in your bank account that matters; it is the affections of your heart. God is not partial to those who are rich with pride and presumption; it is the poor in spirit that move Him.

This ancient temptation still rears its head today. There is not a more blinding, arrogant, and myopically presumptuous belief system than the “prosperity

gospel.” While it promises a long list of earthly treasures to those who will succumb to its lusts, it leaves its victims spiritually bankrupt. Like the rich young ruler, the prosperity gospel appears big and bold on the outside, but when compared to the true gospel, its bleak return on investment is suddenly revealed. Those who adhere to the prosperity gospel possess a view on prosperity that is too small.

## A Vicious Cycle

The wake of devastation the prosperity gospel leaves behind stems from selling a version of Jesus that overpromises and underdelivers. Instead of rightfully putting their primary emphasis on lavish spiritual blessings unlocked in Christ (Eph. 1:3-12), prosperity preachers twist Scripture to put the emphasis on temporary pleasure, promising that Jesus is a Heavenly Banker who wants everyone to be healthy and wealthy on earth. According to the prosperity gospel, Christ’s goal is your comfort. Sadly, there is no comfort to be found. Many people who make donations in exchange for the “American Dream” only end up broke. They are told to sow a seed of faith into the fertile soil of a prosperity preacher’s ministry on the grounds that it will produce a hundredfold return! The painful reality is the only people getting rich are the prosperity preachers themselves. Wash, rinse, repeat.

Is this the picture of the gospel that we see in the Bible?

## There Will Be Suffering

When a prosperity preacher and a faithful preacher stand in front of Christ on Judgment Day, two very different outcomes will occur. For these two preachers, suffering will be inevitable. For the faithful preacher, he would have likely suffered on earth and will be rejoicing as Christ welcomes him into the eternal rewards and riches of heaven! In stark contrast, the prosperity preacher will have lived his best life on earth—free of suffering and peril. Yet, there in front of Christ’s throne, his knee will bow and his tongue will confess Jesus as Lord, then he will enter into eternal suffering.

Each of these preachers will suffer. *When* they suffer and *for how long* they will suffer depends on their faithfulness to the gospel here on earth. Temporal suffering on earth

is but a molecular moment in comparison to infinite ages of heavenly glory. For those who trample the gospel in seeking temporal gain, the suffering that awaits them in eternity is insurmountably greater than all the royal comforts of earth combined.

## Infinite Promises and Eternal Glory

The Bible repeatedly turns our perspective upward into the vast expanse of eternity. The prosperity gospel calls us into a downward spiral that leads to a desolate perspective. Jesus promised that treasure in heaven could not be destroyed (Matt. 6:19-20). Jesus promised suffering saints eternal crowns and glory in His kingdom (Rev. 2:9-10; 3:10-12). Jesus promised that anyone who sacrificed something for His sake would receive many times as much and inherit eternal life (Matt. 19:29). In Christ's kingdom, the first shall be last and the last shall be first (Matt. 19:30). To the poor in spirit belongs the kingdom of heaven (Matt. 5:3). The infinite promise of Christ is that in this world we will have trouble (John 16:33), but He has overcome it and prepares a place for us that is beyond anything the prosperity gospel can deliver (John 14:12). When suffering comes upon us, we can find comfort in the arms of the Prince of Peace (Phil. 4:6-9). Blessings, joy, riches, and comfort are now and will always be found in Christ — but not always in the ways we imagine. These treasures will not always be realized on earth, but for those who choose Christ no matter the cost, these things will be enjoyed for all eternity in heaven.

When I was living the dream as a prosperity gospel benefactor, my confidence soared. I was a “big success.” It was only when Christ opened my eyes to the one true gospel that I was set free from the chains that held my soul. It was then that I realized how bankrupt I truly was. Compared to the eternal riches found in Jesus, the promises of the prosperity will forever be too small. •

*Costi W. Hinn is a pastor and author whose passion is to preach the gospel and serve the church. A student at MBTS, he is the author of forthcoming book, God, Greed, and the (Prosperity) Gospel (Zondervan).*

# Counting the Cost and Counting the Joy: A Call to Christian Women

By Abigail Dodds

*If* there is one thing I could inoculate Christian women against as the tidal wave of post-Christian (im)morality floods American culture, it is our inordinate desire to want to be well-thought of and at peace with everyone. This tendency often drives the belief that if we can just be fully understood and fully understand everyone, then our disagreements will go away. Keep explaining, keep talking—surely we can reach consensus and overcome any obstacle to peace. I'm generalizing, but I think most women can relate.

When Christianity is understood and respected by the culture at large, this desire to be at peace and well-thought of goes unchallenged. Kept in subordination to the Lord, it can act as a virtue. We are, after all, to be reconcilers, to do the things that make for peace. But we must never forget that peace with God means declaring war on sin. Friendship with the world forfeits our peace with God. Being thought well of by God our Father means we will not be thought well of by the world ruled by the Father of lies, “the prince of the power of the air who is now at work in the sons of disobedience” (Ephesians 2:2).

Christian women, we are called to a life of loyalty and devotion to our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. When Christ said, “Mine,” over your life, he qualified you to do something you never could have done on your own. He made you fit to suffer with him and he granted you the privilege of his fellowship in that suffering. It is worth considering: are you ready to suffer with Christ? To be slandered with Christ? To be despised and reviled with Christ? Are you ready to teach the children in Sunday school or at the neighborhood VBS or the women at Bible study or your nieces and nephews or your own children the cost of belonging to Christ? If we have not counted the cost, there is reason to question if we know what we signed up for at all.

We must take an honest look at the price of being Christian women. We must ask ourselves whether we will take up our cross daily and strictly refuse to make light of eternal realities. It is to our own peril that we play games with Jesus. Christianity is not merely a way to get hooked up with a fun group for playdates; it is not merely a way to meet nice people or to enjoy choral music.

Would you be willing to count the cost with me in three ways?

- 1. Are you willing to count the cost of holding fast to God's definition of sin?** The most difficult area to apply this right now is regarding sexuality, but we must agree with God in every area. Will you agree with God that fornication is a sin, that adultery is a sin, that practicing homosexuality is a sin, and that trying to undo your biology and gender is a sin? Will you teach those younger than you the truth about God's good design for male and female without waffling on the consequences of sin? Will you be steadfast in calling greed and gluttony sin? Haughtiness and pride? Envy and murder? Strife and cowardice? And what happens if the law outlaws any of these views? Will you obey God rather than man?
- 2. Are you willing to count the cost of holding fast to God's design of authority?** God has given us clear and orderly instructions about how the home and church are to work together, with members submitting to elders, wives submitting to husbands, and children submitting to parents. He's shown us the way every part of his body is necessary to the other parts and is deemed honorable. What happens if your favorite Christian celebrity changes her mind about God's authority structures? Are your feet firmly planted in God's word? Will you be shaken or blown over?

3. **Are you willing to count the cost of being hated and being called hateful because you appeal to an authority outside of yourself to define sin, truth, love, beauty, goodness, and evil?** In a world where compassion and truth have been made arch enemies, speaking the truth in love is not just an anomaly, it is an impossibility. The post-Christian, post-modern mind has no category for it. Are you willing to offer your enemies the gospel even when they think the gospel is bad news? Are you willing to suffer slander and a tarnished reputation for the sake of Christ? Do you care more about defending your honor or his?

These are hard questions in the midst of a rapidly changing world. They are necessary, but they are not the only questions to consider or even the most important. There is another thing we must be willing to count as Christian women: our joy.

James reminds us to “count it all joy when you face trials of many kinds” (James 1:2). We know that it was “for the joy set before him,” that Jesus endured the cross (Heb 12:2).

Would you be willing to count the joy with me in three ways?

1. **Are you willing to count the joy that comes from calling sin, sin?** Can you quantify the freedom and gladness of repenting of sin and receiving the forgiveness found in Christ? The world is in desperate need of a sacrificial lamb. It has identified some areas of real sin, racism and sexual abuse being at the top of the list. Have you considered the joy that comes in getting to tell others that the sacrificial lamb has already come? Jesus was pierced for our transgressions and by his stripes, we are healed. There is great joy in being healed by Jesus and that joy only doubles when we offer that same healing to a sin-sick world.
2. **Are you willing to count the joy that comes in submitting to God’s design for you as a woman?** Have you contemplated the actual relief and happiness that comes when peace with God gives you peace with yourself too—with your own body

and limitations? With your own position and roles—whether single, married, mothering, or anything else? There is contentment and honor to be found in these womanly bodies, despite the brokenness and despite the ways they do not work properly. Christ’s Spirit has taken up residence with us, women. Have you counted the joy in that?

3. **Are you willing to count the joy of fellowshiping with Christ in his suffering?** Have you given proper consideration to all that God is working in you through any and all suffering with Christ? He’s working for your endurance, your genuine character, and your hope (Romans 5: 4). When God sews hope into the fabric of our hearts, he makes our hearts into big containers, so that he can pour his love into them and drown out all the shame (Romans 5:5). What we gain in intimacy with Christ through suffering makes what we have given up dust on the scales.

Christian women are called to a life of loyalty and devotion to the Lord Jesus Christ. We are not called to be well-liked and well-thought of by everyone. We are not called to make peace with sin. We are called to radical sacrifice and suffering which is daunting to us mere mortals. But women, we are called to joy and that joy is not separate from the suffering—it is in the suffering that our fellowship with Christ is made sweetest and our joy overflows.

So, by all means, let’s count the cost of being Christian women, but let us never forget to count the joy. The infinite Christ is ours in every circumstance. •

*Abigail Dodds is a wife, mother of five, and graduate student at Bethlehem College & Seminary. She is author of (A)Typical Woman: Free, Whole, and Called in Christ.*

# Principally Conservative, Convictionally Christian: On Transcendent Truths and Divine Realities

By Don Sweeting

Y

ou may think the phrase “conservative Christian” has seen better days, that it has been stretched to the point of meaninglessness. Some think it has, but I don’t. It still distinguishes someone from a “progressive Christian” in the social or political sense or a “liberal Christian” in the theological sense.

Of course, *conservative* must be defined much like the word *liberal* must be defined. Conservative could possibly mean reactionary, committed to the status quo, monarchist, authoritarian, etc., but that is not how I am using the term here. Terms like conservative and liberal also have their limits. Meanings can shift from one generation to another. For example, modern progressive liberalism and classical liberalism are two very different things. In this era, a classical liberal is actually a conservative similar to modern conservatives.

I sometimes describe the university where I serve as president as “principally conservative and convictionally Christian.” By principally conservative, I mean that we believe in what Russell Kirk called “permanent things,” that is, truths and realities rooted in a transcendent God and his created order. Unlike many universities we are not “post.” The secular university often boasts of being post-Christian, post-truth, post-virtue, post-meaning, post-wisdom, post-Western, post-history, and sometimes even post-reason.

Standing in the great tradition of higher education, we believe in truth, we teach virtue, life-purpose, and wisdom, we value the past and our cultural heritage, we see reason as a gift. We want our students to love goodness, beauty and truth. We welcome the

exploration of great ideas, great books, and great lives. We are also convictionally Christian. That is, we are serious about our faith. We are not casually Christian, or nominally Christian, and certainly are not Christophobic. We are not moving away from Christ, but desire to move toward him. We need Jesus, and believe the world needs Jesus, for he is the Christ, the Son of God, the light of the world, the living water, the bread of life, the logos, the word of God.

We aspire to be Christ-centered. We believe that, as Colossians says, Christ is the one in whom all things hold together. We believe that the gospel of Jesus is the greatest people-changing, culture-changing force in human history. By listing our Christian label second, I do not mean to imply it is somehow subordinate to being conservative. In the manner I defined it, Christianity is not only compatible with being conservative, but a conservative philosophy *flows from* a Christian worldview.

## Rediscoveries of a 25-Year-Old

I made two significant discoveries, or rediscoveries when I was 25 years old.

First, I rediscovered the gospel of Jesus Christ. That year, I worked as an assistant to Chuck Colson at Prison Fellowship. At the time, Chuck was spending a lot of time with R.C. Sproul and J.I. Packer. Thus, his Reformed influences were significant. I had grown up in a Christian home, so I knew the gospel, but while working with Chuck and traveling with him to prisons all over America, I rediscovered the gospel’s power and, at the same time, realized the limits of external political change.



While politics are important, I discovered they cannot change the human heart. The deepest changes in the world are not those from the outside in, but from the inside out—changes of the heart. Paul says in Romans 1:16, the gospel is “the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes.” I met many inmates whose lives had fallen apart, who had literally hit rock-bottom. I saw them radically and genuinely transformed by a saving relationship with Jesus Christ. Witnessing this created within me a desire to work for those deep changes that humans so desperately need.

I also made a second discovery: I discovered political first principles. That discovery came partly through reading Russell Kirk’s book, *The Conservative Mind*. Kirk talked about the importance of “permanent things,” a type of wisdom that can help us navigate the issues and controversies of politics. While studying political science at a secular university, I was often exasperated at how the grounds of political debate kept changing. Standards were always shifting and relativism reigned. There were no constants. Politics was untethered from first principles or unchanging standards. It felt like we were, as Paul described in 2 Timothy 3:7, “ever learning but never coming to a knowledge of the truth.”

Russell Kirk’s book helped give me clarity. Kirk and his “six canons of conservative thought” reminded me of standards and principles (conservative principles) that are not out of date. They are constants that can guide us in each generation. The primacy of the gospel and a better grasp of permanent things (political first principles) became anchors in my thinking and in my ministry. I look back on that pivotal year in my life with gratefulness for being exposed to both Colson and Kirk.

## Political First Principles

Here are a few “first principles” that guide my thinking. My short list reflects Kirk’s six canons, but I’ve expanded on his list.

1. **There is a transcendent being and a created order, in contrast to naturalism, nihilism, and the ideal of absolute autonomy.** William Buckley once said, “Conservatism is the politics of reality,” reminding us that there is an ultimate reality we all have to deal with. As a Christian, I frame this point theologically. There is a personal God who is Lord and King, to whom the nations are accountable. Righteousness and justice are the foundation of His throne. Governments must answer to Him, contrary to the idolatry of statism.
2. **There is a moral law, contrary to what the relativists say.** Some refer to this in terms of natural law. The point is that there are standards which never change. Some issues are not simply left and right, but are issues of right and wrong.
3. **Human nature is mixed and fixed, contra the idea that we are all basically good and perfectible.** I affirm the sanctity, the nobility (imago dei), the limitations, and the fallenness of human beings. People matter because we are made in His image; this is where human rights are ultimately grounded. But we are in rebellion and can’t redeem ourselves. We need a Savior!
4. **While humankind is wonderfully diverse, we are equal in the eyes of God.** Hence, we affirm, not equality of outcomes, but equality of dignity and equality under the law. This is contrary to the idea that some people are worth more than others or that some are above the law.
5. **Freedom is a precious gift.** True freedom is an ordered liberty, in contrast to autonomous liberty where “everyone does what is right in their own eyes,” i.e. the biblical recipe for social disaster. Again, Scripture speaks more pointedly, asserting that the truth sets us free, and more specifically, the Son of God sets us free. In other words, there is a vital faith-freedom link. Our nation’s founding fathers realized this. They understood that politics is a reflection of culture and culture is, in part, the outworking of a people’s morality. But morality is greatly dependent on the religious life of a society. In other words, faith is an important pre-political condition. As De Tocqueville said, “Liberty cannot be established without morality or morality without faith.”

6. **The state is ordained by God to be a servant of God.** It is to help restrain evil and promote justice and the common good in contrast to statism in which the government usurps the place of God.
7. **Politics is a limited activity, contra the political illusion that politics is everything and can solve our deepest problem.** Politics are important, but cannot ultimately usher in the Kingdom of God.
8. **Mediating institutions are immensely important.** The state and society are not identical. The family is the first and foundational of all institutions. Churches are important and operate in a sphere separate from the state.
9. **Freedom of religion is immensely important.** It is our first freedom in terms of our nation's history and our constitutional amendments. While conservatism is not theocratic, it is friendly to faith—not just in terms of freedom of worship, but in terms of freedom to practice our faith. Besides that, the state needs prophetic voices calling the state to account.

I believe these permanent principles are never out of date. They guide like a compass. They are foundational for political wisdom, for our democratic republic, our free market system, and our constitutional order.

## Things to Keep in Mind About Christian Conservatives

My conservatism is shaped by the God of the Bible. Before Colson and Kirk, before Burke, before Calvin and Aquinas, and even before Augustine, was Scripture itself.

Not all conservatives are Christians and not all Christians are conservatives, but there are a few things to keep in mind about Christian conservatives, specifically.

1. **Our first loyalties are to Jesus Christ and His kingdom.** We are “kingdom” people first, before any party label. As such, we believe in a proper patriotism, but not in an egocentric, ethnocentric nationalism. While we acknowledge Christ's lordship, we do not advocate for a theocratic state. We are not after

religious establishment. We really do believe in a proper separation of church and state.

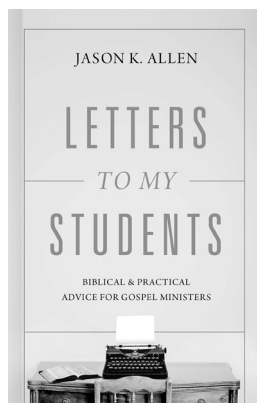
2. **We have a gospel mandate.** The good news of Christ will always be our first message. Morality is very important, but it is not enough. People need to be made right with God.
3. **The church and culture both matter.** Culture matters because of the first great commission given in the book of Genesis. The church matters because of the second great commission given in Acts and Matthew.
4. **Redeeming the culture is beyond our ability.** The kingdom of God cannot be fully realized through politics or human achievement. For this, we await the return of the King. However, redeemed people are called to be salt and light, to fortify and build what is good, and to make this invisible kingdom visible.
5. **We aspire to engage in politics and debate with grace and truth.** That is, with convictional kindness. We don't hate anyone. We want to engage with respect, but engage we must.

The battles we face are real; the outcomes are of immense importance. What we are facing in our time is not merely a culture war, nor is the phrase “cold civil war” all that helpful. Rather, there is a spiritual, intellectual, moral, and legal battle for the hearts and minds of the next generation and for the foundation of our civilization. The forces of post-modern deconstructionism, soft nihilism, and cultural Marxism are upending our culture. There is a great need for a new generation of leaders who understand these permanent things and are committed to turning the world right-side up again. •

*Don Sweeting is President of Colorado Christian University and the coauthor of How to Finish the Christian Life: Following Jesus in the Second Half.*

# Books *In Brief*

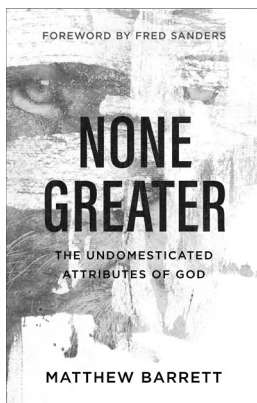
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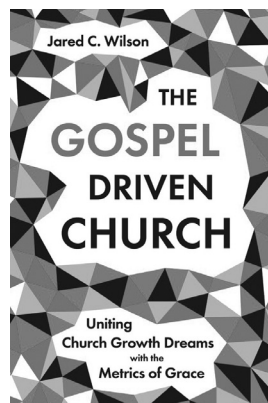
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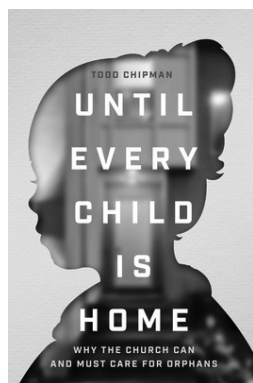
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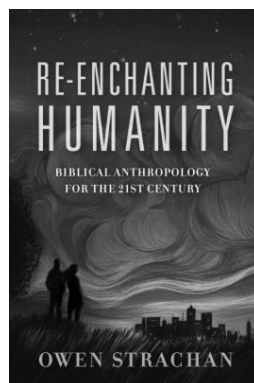
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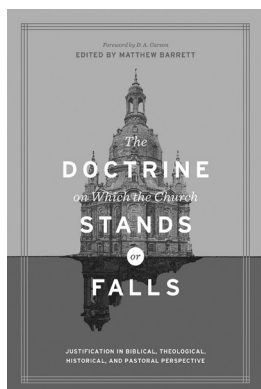
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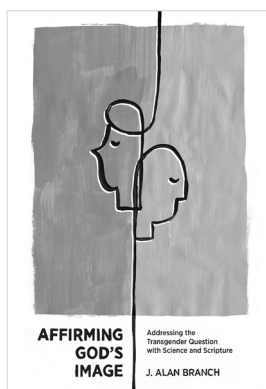
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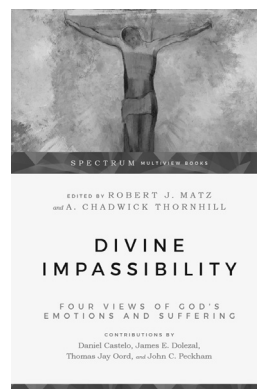
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for the Church

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# “It’s simply a Christian witness”: Thomas Kidd on the Value of Evangelical Scholarship

## EDITOR’S NOTE

The following is excerpted from a *City of God* interview released in October 2017.

**OS | It is my privilege today to be with Dr. Thomas Kidd. He is known to many of us as a religious historian, a public intellectual, and a churchman who loves the Scripture and loves gospel-centered ministry.**

**TK |** Thanks for having me.

**OS | I’ve given a basic bio to listeners. If you could, tell us how you came to be a religious historian. How did you end up in this particular vocation?**

**TK |** Right. Well, the providence of God.

**OS | Good answer.**

**TK |** I made a commitment to Christ for the first time in when I was a freshman in college at Clemson University. That set me down a path of new life in Christ, but also trying to understand how you think as a Christian. I had some help with that with some people in a parachurch ministry. I was involved with the Navigators and also a few Christian professors who gave me some pointers about things to read. At some point, I don’t know when exactly, but I started to come across the work George Marsden at the University Notre Dame, who became my doctoral advisor, who I thought was a great example. I didn’t realize how important of a historian he was, I was learning my way through these things. I thought he was a great example of a historian who was explicitly Christian, but also is able to write for

secular outlets in a way that is fathomable for a secular audience. Yet he was openly Christian and I found that to be really encouraging example. Then I did a Masters in history at Clemson and, somewhere along the way, I came across the work of Perry Miller, who is not a Christian historian, but an atheist historian who was probably the greatest historian of the American Puritans. I was just smitten reading Miller because Miller was very respectful to the Puritan’s ideas. He took it very seriously even though he didn’t share their beliefs and so that sort of merged my interest in the Christian intellectual life and early American history. When I contacted George Marsden about possible working with him, I found out he was starting to work on a biography of Jonathan Edwards and so everything came together so that I was able to work with Marsden and go to Notre Dame for a PhD there.

**OS | I want to come back to the Marsden experience, but when it comes to Miller and some other historians of that era, who as you say were secular in their outlook and were not evangelicals as you and I are, what do you see as the genesis for Miller’s interest in Edwards and the Puritans. What accounts for it?**

**TK |** He was coming out of a generation in the progressive era, post World War I, 1920s. When he was a young man, historians were generally contemptuous of the Puritans because they weren’t progressive. Everything has to be heading towards



democracy and they weren't democratic enough, so they were to be dismissed. I think that Miller came of age in a time that was more interested in taking ideas on their own terms and being respectful to people who were serious about ideas even if those ideas differed from their own. He was very bothered, as many people of that generation were. He became a professor in the 1930's, in the Great Depression, then he served as an intelligence office in World War II and he was very troubled about the bomb. He thinks that America had become a nation that was technologically unstoppable, but not grounded in principles. So he really respected the Puritans because they were people who made decisions on the basis of theological ideas and he wasn't scared of that. He was a big fan of Reinhold Niebuhr and considered himself a member of this group of intellectuals that called themselves "Atheists for Niebuhr." That's what accounts for it and his books are very demanding and long, but remarkably admiring of the puritan's intellectual achievement.

**OS | [Many] recognize Miller as this titanic figure in history. He almost single-handedly restarts Jonathan Edwards studies.**

**TK |** He's the charter editor of the works of Jonathan Edwards.

**OS | I heard a story once, that I can't confirm, that when he read Edwards on damnation, on the tougher stuff, as an atheist he felt the need to drink afterward because it was so disturbing. So a varied approach to Edwards. ... Jumping back now to Notre Dame. I have heard that when you were at Notre Dame, working under Marsden was such an impressive experience, an intense experience that would have to be reading all the time, constantly brewing a pot of coffee and drinking and reading. Is that true?**

**TK |** Yeah, I don't know if Notre Dame was uniquely demanding, but like any history PhD program, you're having to read so much. One time, I did bother to calculate that during coursework I was having to read on average seven books a week and so do what you have to do. On into my dissertation, I would set my alarm for 6 AM, just brew pot of coffee, and I would read and write

until noon or so. That's how I got through.

**OS | You subsisted on ideas and coffee. From Notre Dame, under Marsden, you now teach at Baylor. What was that process like?**

**TK |** When I was on the market, it was one of the last good years academia has seen so it was actually okay for me. I had already defended my dissertation and that makes the market easier. I was interviewing for some secular jobs and some Christian jobs. I really would've been open to either one. Again, in all seriousness, about the providence of God, I had experienced being a Christian in a secular environment as an undergrad at Clemson, so that would've been fine with me, any job would've been fine for me. It turned out that Baylor, at that time, had just launched what was called the "2012 initiative" that was seeking to re-confirm Baylor's Christian mission while also becoming more fully a research university.

So Baylor ended up, in every very sense, being the best job option for me and had a really inspiring vision. Of course on the Christian landscape, there are a lot of Christian liberal arts colleges and, on the Catholic side, you do have some research universities and schools including Notre Dame, of sort of various Catholic commitments. But on the Protestant side, there are not many institutions trying to be full-blown research universities with PhD programs, with full-blown science and engineering programs. So it really was a captivating vision and there have been some bumps along the way, but I've been there for 15 years and I think a lot of that vision has been fulfilled and sustained. I've gone through the ranks of tenure and have become a distinguished professor; it's a terrific situation.

**OS | People might expect that if they read your bio and your title "Distinguished Professor" that you might be 25 years older than you are. Do you ever get that?**

**TK |** Part of what it meant at Baylor to be the research university that it is that they made a lot of space for people who are wanting to write to be able to write. So I have a lot of time for research and writing. I'm really

grateful for that. I think I should have something to show for myself.

**OS | That's a beautiful thing. Why do evangelicals have such a hard time, even protestants more broadly, building actual research schools? Secularists are great with research universities. Why do we have so many colleges, which are great, but so few research universities? What are some factors?**

**TK |** Not surprisingly, I think George Marsden has the best analysis of this in his book *The Soul of the American University*. The great research universities, especially in the east, were founded as Christian schools and, over the course of the 19th and 20th centuries, pressure was brought to bear by various funding agencies to be less and less sectarian about the Christian commitments. Some of those schools' Christian commitments lasted, at least in a general sense, for an awfully long time, but they couldn't have a denominational commitment and also be getting special government funding, at least not in the same way. It wasn't bad, but there was pressure brought to bear in a lot of cases. Are you going to be a Christian school or are you going to be a research university?

Also, in terms of turning Christian schools into research universities, it's extremely expensive to have professors on the kind of teaching loads required, especially in the sciences and engineering. They require massive capital and investment. A lot of times donors, quite appropriately, want to know what the work has to do directly with the kingdom of a God, often evangelism and the sorts of things that they're interested in. So funding, say research in environmental science or something like that, may not be at the top of their list and I understand that to a point.

The trouble is that most top flight research in most fields is assumed to be secular and we've lost an opportunity of witness in many fields to be engaged as Christians, but we don't need tons of Christian research universities. That's clear. Having some who are engaged in research is essential to the Christian witness in American intellectual life and academia and in higher, symbolic capital venues of American culture.

**OS | James Davidson Hunter, D. Michael Lindsey's research, and others would show us that there is a sense in which scholars and intellectuals at least play a part in running the world, so to speak, but you think about the cultural capital of the faculties at the Ivy League, you recognize that there actually are worldviews being shaped. It's not just courses taught, in terms of accretion of data and papers written. Those faculties are giving students a worldview, so to have so few Christians playing at that level really does rob us. Actually, in the end, you could probably argue that it robs us of evangelistic help all the way down the line.**

**TK |** Absolutely. Those people have access to the great media outlets and cultural shaping institutions in all kinds of ways. There are evangelistic opportunities; it's simply a Christian witness. You look at someone like George Marsden who for his Jonathan Edwards biography wins the Bancroft Prize in American history, which for a professional is the top honor. It's like the Pulitzer Prize within history, awarded by the Columbia University history department which is not exactly a Christian hotbed. That kind of thing says that there's a devout, open Christian whose work is taken very seriously and then reminds this generation that there are intellectually formidable people who are believers. I think that has a lot of culturally, intellectually, academically, and in terms of our witness to the watching world.

**OS | It's so hard to make that case for the research university. I was rereading the book on the Inklings that came out a year ago, and Marsden, Wolterstorff, we could name different names obviously, but when you actually do get a C.S. Lewis or a Tolkien in that kind of position, you start to understand just how much weight they can have. C.S. Lewis is an Oxford don and a Cambridge don, that's that high-level teaching and research, but what is he able to do? He's able to publish books of apologetics that we're still reading and win many to the faith. So there's work to be done in terms of helping the church see the value of high-level scholarship, research, and the life of the mind.**

**OS | Your newest book is *Benjamin Franklin: The Religious Life of a Founding Father*. It just came**

**out with Yale. I have read it, digested it, actually kind of slowly because I really wanted to make sure I got the argument and benefited from it. As I read your book, your thesis seemed to be that Franklin is far more religious than some people have said. He's not an evangelical Christian, you're very clear on that. He descends from a Calvinist background and all his life, he is really something of a kind of theistic providentialist. He believes that God guides things, believes in a moral life and the moral law of the universe, even as taught by God. But he doesn't have much to say about Christ. What were you after with this book?**

**TK |** The faith of the founding fathers is so debated and many people are interested and will use the founding fathers for various political purposes, on the Christian Right, the secular left. They all want to claim the founders as the beginning of what they're about and some will say we're a Christian nation and our founders were Christians and others will say we're a secular nation, that they were all deists and closet atheists. As usual, the truth is more complicated than these polemical positions would suggest. I think I have something to contribute.

I would love to tell people that Benjamin Franklin was a believer. I would be the first to say that if I thought that he was, but I don't think he ever made a commitment to Christ for salvation. But as you suggested, he grows up in a very devout Puritan family and one of the things that does to him is it leaves a biblicist imprint on the way he thinks, talks, and writes. It is so deep. Yes, he was a deist of a certain kind; he tells us that in his autobiography, so we can start there. But if that's all you know then it's hard to make sense of the way he is so deeply influenced by the Bible. I think that as he grows older, he goes through a radical skeptical phase in his late teens, early twenties. As he grows older, especially as he gets into the revolutionary period, he is drifting back toward the faith of his parents, though not in a way that he is making a personal commitment to it. This would explain what I think is the most remarkable moment of Ben Franklin's life, which is him requesting that the constitutional convention open sessions with prayer. This shows that he's complex and it turns out that most of the other delegates don't want to open sessions with prayer and

they table the motion. So it's even stranger that Franklin, the deist, is the one who had this idea. It shows that even though he runs away from the faith of his parents, it left such a strong imprint on him.

**OS |** He seems to me, in your telling, that he is a kind of the forerunner of the modern progressive. A number of historians and scholars have written on the meaning of the fragmentation of mainline Christianity, for example I think of Joseph Bottum and others. What we're seeing, I think you could argue, is that when you come from a religious heritage or background, raised in the church, you don't necessarily switch into a kind of hard, new atheism. Many people retain many of those castes of mind, especially the moralizing tendency, which frankly is probably inherent to the human conscience. I see that in spades in Franklin.

**TK |** That's right. I think you see what I call doctrineless, moralized Christianity. Christian Smith has called it moralistic therapeutic deism, which I think I'm fine with, but not as well for Franklin because I don't think it's as therapeutic of an age. There is a deemphasizing of doctrine to the point where it doesn't matter what you believe, it's about the way that you live. That's what I mean by doctrineless. Any doctrine becomes optional in the way he thinks about religion, except maybe the existence of God. He certainly believes in Christ's moral teachings and believes that they're true. But issues of the Trinity, Christ's divinity, he just thinks that if you believe that it doesn't really matter. You see that today in pop spirituality. It can be dismissive to bring up Joel Osteen or Oprah Winfrey, but for Franklin, it was very serious intellectual business to be thinking through these things.

You see it in echoes of Barak Obama's faith within The United Church of Christ. It's all worked out in what you do and how you live. You see it in NGOs and the attraction of secular people and service organizations. This remains essential for these sorts of people. The truth is that people of faith are actually much more charitable and service oriented than secular people are today, but you still see very prominent examples of people who will say, "Well I am not going to insist that

you believe anything in particular, but you really should live out the life of service and morality.”

**OS | Thinking of Christology, Franklin’s Christology, if you will, is very functional. I think we could say more about what Christ did and what Christ would have us do, maybe that’s the way to say it. In your book, you highlight his interactions with Jane Mecom, his Calvinist sister, a born-again believer. They have a lifelong correspondence and really an argument over God, Christ, and salvation. Both Jane and George Whitefield raise in their letters with Ben Franklin something about Christ and the need to prepare for eternity and he will relentlessly pivot to “I agree to a point” but in his slippery way such that he can agree with you, but not really be agreeing with you. He’ll pivot to morals and living a good life. Christ is an obstacle for him.**

**TK |** That’s right. Christ is an obstacle for him; he’s a stumbling stone. It’s interesting to see. That’s been one of my favorite parts of the book, tracing out his sister’s relationship with him. It was said to be very endearing, which is very significant even though she doesn’t even appear in his autobiography. That is a slight, typical of an 18th-century poor woman, but they have a very close relationship, which is the closest of any of his siblings. Jane and the great preacher George Whitefield, who is better known than Franklin at the time, are both imploring Franklin to put his faith in Christ for salvation. Those are both really special relationships, but he doesn’t ever seem to have a definitively responded to their overtures.

**OS | We’re going to be in some uneasy tension when it comes to him and a number of the Founding Fathers on the absorbing question, “Was America Christian?” It really is a complicated matter. Books like this and the breadth of your scholarly work accomplished several things. They show that many people in American history have taken religion very seriously even if people don’t today, but you have to account for that if you’re going to do business with them in our time.**

**TK |** I think Franklin and Jefferson are good examples

of people who are Bible-haunted characters. Jefferson is cutting out the resurrection in the Gospels, but he knows the Bible well enough to put together his own edition of the gospel. He’s consumed with it. Whoever wants to do this is consumed with what the scripture means. So you know that the new atheists today don’t often seem to know very much about religion, but that’s not the way that Jefferson and Franklin were.

**OS | In terms of your writing, how do you approach your next book? How do you think through what you want to write about and how do you tackle that?**

**TK |** My books tend to jump off from the end of the last book either chronologically or topically. I do have themes that run through my work. The two main areas are the Great Awakening of the 18th century and then, the revolutionary period and what difference faith made in the American founding. There’s no coincidence that I did the Whitefield book in 2014, partly in time for Whitfield’s 300th birthday, but then the Franklin book becomes a flip side of the Whitefield because they had this amazing friendship for 30 years with Whitefield as the great evangelical and Franklin as the secular, enlightenment leader. In the end, they had similarities and really understood one another, better than many of Franklin’s secular friends understood him. That tends to be the way I think through things.

Sometimes I do things like what I’m doing now which is writing an American history textbook for B&H Academic, which they approached me about. When I get around to my next book, I’ll probably do a biography of Jefferson along the same kind of lines. Jefferson engages intellectually on issues of faith, culture, and politics, and he leaves an profound legacy. I think there’s a desperate need for a Christian audience to try to understand where he’s coming from.

**OS | I couldn’t agree more. Thank you, Tommy, for your time and your very important work.**

**TK |** Thanks for having me. •

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# The Debonair and Delightful William F. Buckley, Jr.: What Evangelical Public Intellectuals Might Learn from a Catholic Luminary

By Andrew Walker

## INTRODUCTION

In the midst of today's political rancor and division, it seems that warriors on both sides are concerned more with defeating the enemy than ideological commitments. What seems needed is a person with actual ideological commitments, willing to fight, but also unwilling to sink to demeaning or dehumanizing attacks. Though those seem to be in short supply, evangelical leaders can look to the past for an example from Catholic circles: William F. Buckley, Jr. This leader of the modern conservative movement provides an excellent example of the way that Christian intellectuals can engage the public square from an ideologically conservative worldview in a winsome and powerful manner.

### **Buckley in Context**

The context into which Buckley stepped was not unlike our own. Political liberalism was a dominant force and often positioned its opponents as "on the wrong side of history." There was a weak and almost nonexistent conservative movement. While there may have been a conservative movement characterized by American civil religion or moral puritanism, the 1950s were not a time of actual conservative ideology.



Buckley was able to unite formerly dissonant or isolated political voices into a single melody. He was able to bring together social conservatives, libertarians, and free-market economists committed to a limited government centered around the promotion of liberty. They were united across their differences because they were combatting a common enemy: a growing leviathan seeking to bring all of political and social life under the umbrella of the government. From this diverse group, Buckley founded organizations, newspapers, and a collation of thinkers to shape mid-twentieth century political public discourse.

But how does Christianity fit into this Buckleyean paradigm? As a Catholic, Buckley's conservatism owes much to the borrowed capital of Christian anthropology. Both agree that humanity is created for certain ends resulting in happiness. Both also teach that humanity is "fallen" and "finite." Where modern liberalism sees our bodies as instruments capable of being recreated in endless possibilities, both conservatism and Christianity tell us that we are, in the words of Thomas Sowell, "constrained." These limits are not to be overcome, but celebrated. For a proper understanding of self leads to a proper understanding of the right ends of the individual and society.

Then, just as now, the limits of self and personhood were being given over to the state. Progress for the sake of progress, untethered from moral norms, leads to inevitable moral atrocity and misery. Humanity is not just a material being, contrary to the scientific paradigm of the day. People are body and soul, and both are in need of cultivation. This is a point which Buckley was able to draw out in his leadership of the fledgling conservative movement.

### **Buckley as Happy Warrior**

So what did the example set by Buckley look like in his time?

It was defined by two things: jovial demeanor and philosophical rigor. Buckley's style was characterized by equal parts wit, charm, and conviction. Unlike politicians who are famous for their anger or explosive moments, Buckley was able to balance intellectually

rigorous criticism with good-natured ridicule and satire. This was not mockery for the sake of mockery. Nor was he a firebrand who sought to stir emotions. Rather, in the face of the absurdity of the progressive movement he faced, the only true antidote was a healthy measure of laughter and eye-rolling. In his decriing of the perils of unmoored progressivism, he could stand athwart the march of progressivism and yell "Stop!" while the Christian ought to be inclined to tell, and "Repent!" while also offering a joyous defiance and mockery of the illogical conclusions.

However, it was not just the ability to critique and mock that made Buckley important. It was the way in which he was conversant with the broader cultural trends of his time. Just as Chesterton, Kuyper, and Lewis understood their cultures, so too did Buckley speak in the intellectual language of his time. He offered a new conservatism that was sanguine. It valued the tools of humanity for the sake of advancing a shared view of human flourishing defined not by love of self, but of all humanity. It is no surprise that many of conservatism's greatest thinkers were also Christian in a broad sense: From Edmund Burke, C. S. Lewis, Orestes Brownson, Russell Kirk, Whittaker Chambers, Dorothy Sayers to modern day thinkers like Robert P. George. Nor is it unusual that so many of Christianity's intellectuals identify with a conservative political philosophy: from Abraham Kuyper, Francis Schaeffer, Carl Henry to intellectuals like Albert Mohler. The connection between these two streams is strong and intellectually prominent.

### **Buckley as Public Example**

This is all well and good for the time of Buckley, but what of today? Have we reached a moment when laughter and joy in the face of opposition are no longer useful? Should evangelicals be willing to fight and win at any cost necessary?

I say no. A Christianity that wishes to be vibrant in the current moment would do well to learn from the example set by Buckley. Christian leaders can learn from his organizational and movement building as well as his longer goals for the movement. Buckley built institutions that helped serve the conservative movement. The strength of any movement exists in the

relationships and ideas that comprise it. A Christianity that is not simultaneously attentive to both its own institutions and public witness cannot fulfill the robust demands of orthodoxy.

Christian leaders can learn also from his vision of a broad coalition united around the same goals. There may be places where Christians of different streams can disagree over issues such as baptism practices, but Nicene Christianity can be united in such basic assertions that gender is a fixed category and life is important from womb to tomb. Leaders should look for alliances without sacrificing their convictions. We need not all be Catholics as Buckley was to see the common ground that evangelicals, Catholics, and other orthodox Christians share with one another.

The importance of this movement will not be political wins, but rather cultural sustainability. This means that leaders should impart to their audiences the importance of deep networks of community and growth. Parents who disciple their children are just as important as weekly meetings with the congregation. It is in the ecology of deep family and relational formation that a movement goes from momentary to sustainable.

Finally, Christian leaders should recognize that it is in the midst of the ruins of culture that Christianity does its best work. Buckley spoke in a moment of intense cultural confusion. The conservative movement was nascent and ineffective. Yet, Buckley knew that his message of cultural conservatism offered a unique message precisely because of that discord.

In the same way, Christian leaders must see the current moment of growing secularization and division as a chance for actual engagement. Leaders must insist on a Christianity whose ethics are intelligible, life-giving, and at all times applicable to the public square. If the church fails to speak clearly in the public square, then someone else will speak wrongly. Leaders must see the current moment as but one instance where the Church speaks the same message it always has, a gospel that is good news for society, regardless of whether society believes its message is good or not.

## Conclusion

William F. Buckley recognized that our lives are not to be devoted to the penultimate. There was a need for a culturally sustainable and strong conservative tradition. This belief paired was an outgrowth of his Catholic faith. Christian leaders of all traditions—especially the evangelical tradition—should recognize the same: a worldview shaped by the ultimate should inform and guide life in the penultimate. Both the conservative and Christian tradition recognize the brokenness of humanity and the reality of enfolded souls who are moral agents. Christians' worldview of the penultimate should flow downstream from their view of the ultimate guided by recognition of human dignity and a deep concern for cultural institutions such as marriage, family, and life. •

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# Gentlemen Shepherds and Invisible Sherpas: The Task of Theological Educators

By Jason G. Duesing

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*he task of the modern educator is not to cut down jungles but to irrigate deserts.*

—C. S. Lewis, *The Abolition of Man*

The first time I attended the national meeting of the Evangelical Theological Society, I was an aspiring-but-not-yet PhD student. A classmate and I made the journey to Colorado Springs to hear scholars we had only read but never seen or met. In those days, scholastic luminaries were debating the nature of God in the ornate ballrooms of The Broadmoor Hotel.<sup>44</sup> Due to the financial limits of seminary students, we spent our evenings in more modest accommodations, and yet, in our three-star hotel we encountered another kind of scholar. There we met two of what church historian E. Brooks Holifield called “Gentlemen Theologians.”<sup>45</sup>

Holifield documented how a segment of clergy in antebellum America were “proponents of clerical gentility.” Spread throughout all denominations, and though often disagreeing among themselves over major and minor issues, these Gentlemen Theologians were the ones who made the decisions that shaped churches. In short, these were the ministers who gave a voice to “orthodox religious thought.”<sup>46</sup>

Staying with us in that hotel were the now late Roger Nicole (1915-2010) and Simon Kistemaker (1930-2017) from Reformed Theological Seminary. While not chronologically of the class of Holifield’s gentlemen, they carried their same spirit. To come to this assessment, my classmate and I did not spend the evening asking

them questions or embarking on a formal mentoring relationship. Rather, we simply observed them at breakfast and that made all the difference.

One morning, as is universal with the hotel complimentary breakfast scene, chaos was in full force as families and other guests were nosily consuming eggs and pastries while waiting in line at the waffle station. In their midst, I noticed Dr. Nicole holding a table while his colleague patiently waited his turn at the toaster, albeit with a puzzled look on his face.

Someone had left their toast unattended and Dr. Kistemaker was at a loss how to maneuver so he could have his turn. Rather than toss aside the abandoned and browned slices, he lifted them to a clean plate and proceeded among the grazing throng asking all if this toast might be theirs. Given that most were talking past him and his own aged meekness, not all could hear him, but some did, and soon he was relieved and carried on with his own meal.

While this might not appear that remarkable, how he went about that simple matter with unpretentious care and concern for a stranger’s food made a lasting impression on a young seminarian. Here were two academics, in town for a meeting at which they were well-known and highly regarded, lodging at a basic hotel and taking the time amid the tumult of the free breakfast to honor and care for those with whom they were eating. It was gentlemanly and spoke volumes.

When thinking about the task of the theological educator, as important as is the practice of the

<sup>44</sup> “Reports Relating to the Fifty-Third Annual Meeting of the Society,” *JETS* 45/1 (March 2002): 183-88.

<sup>45</sup> E. Brooks Holifield, *The Gentlemen Theologians: American Theology in Southern Culture, 1795-1860* (Duke University Press, 1978).

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 24.

theological educator—what he does, the educator’s posture is equally important—how he does it. The care and carefulness required for the task is embodied in this example of the posture displayed by these Gentlemen theologians. As I have met and observed several others like them over the years, I have concluded that the theological educator best cares for those he serves when he embodies this practice and posture of gentlemanly care through a conscious effort to do his work as a Gentlemen Shepherd and as an Invisible Sherpa.

## **The Theological Educator as Shepherd: Contending in Public as Shepherds**

When a pastor friend of mine gave me a copy of Roger Nicole’s essay, “Polemic Theology: How to Deal with Those Who Differ from Us,” I took notice, recalling my breakfast experience.<sup>47</sup> How fitting it was for a scholar of his stature to write a piece like this, for I had seen a glimpse of how he might model care for another’s words and thoughts in the same gentlemanly fashion his colleague cared for a stranger’s abandoned breakfast. As I have read and learned more, the testimony of Roger Nicole is that he was representative of a generation of such scholars.

Often the posture of the theological educator is challenged most at the point of public response to criticism. For one can contend in public as a Shepherd without having also to condemn. Theological Shepherds need not hide from controversy or gloss over such with thin platitudes. No, as Nicole made clear:

We are called upon by the Lord to contend earnestly for the faith (Jude 3). That does not necessarily involve being contentious; but it involves avoiding compromise, standing forth for what we believe, standing forth for the truth of God—without welching at any particular moment. Thus we are bound to meet, at various points and on various levels, people with whom we disagree.<sup>48</sup>

However, care should also be given to how one engages. Another observation Holifield made about his nineteenth century Gentlemen Theologians related not just to what they believed, but how they wielded their theology and how their actions were received in their culture. He explained,

The theology was used, among other purposes, to attract and reassure men and women ... that ‘reasonable’ behavior—restraint, order, refinement, self-control, self-improvement, and similar virtues that sometimes seemed alien in [their] culture—was congruent with the deepest nature of things.<sup>49</sup>

Holifield described men who exercised self-control with their thoughts and words in service of others. This restraint sometimes seemed alien to the watching world, but it was consistent, not inconsistent, with what they say they believed.

Along these lines, Nicole also offered,

One method that I have found helpful in making sure that I have dealt fairly with a position that I could not espouse was to assume that a person endorsing that view was present in my audience (or was reading what I had written). Then my aim is to represent the view faithfully and fully without mingling the criticism with factual statements. In fact, I try to represent them so faithfully and fully that an adherent to that position might comment, “This man certainly does understand our view!” It would be a special boon if one could say, ‘I never heard it stated better!’ Thus I have earned the right to criticize. But before I proceed to do this, it is only proper that I should have demonstrated that I have a correct understanding of the position I desire to contest.<sup>50</sup>

Earning the right to criticize seems like it should be a vital mark of the posture of the theological educator as

<sup>47</sup> Roger R. Nicole, “Polemical Theology: How to Deal with Those Who Differ from Us,” *Founders Journal* 33 (Summer 1998), 24-35.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>49</sup> Holifield, *Gentlemen Theologians*, 206.

<sup>50</sup> Nicole, “Polemical Theology,” 24-35.

Shepherd, for this care is contrary to many who often go too far in critique—without significant care or personal interaction.

## Civil Kindness as a Shepherd's Virtue

If one truly feels that their brother or sister in Christ has moved beyond substantive difference of opinion to a place of heterodoxy, the Shepherd should defend and protect the truth, but I question wisdom of addressing that first in an instantaneous, public, and non-peer reviewed environment. The issue for me is not necessarily one of accuracy or need, for heterodoxy should always be addressed. The issue for the theological educator as Shepherd, in any debate, is one of public civility and kindness.

Richard Mouw, in his 1992 book, *Uncommon Decency: Christian Civility in an Uncivil World*, affirmed that God has a concern for public righteousness, necessitating that Christians are to be agents of God's righteousness. Yet, he argued that "our efforts at public righteousness must be modest ones" for the "world has already been visited by one overwhelmingly adequate Messiah."<sup>51</sup>

While it is helpful to frame the posture of the theological educator as Shepherd through in terms of Mouw's modest civility—for we know we do need more of this—I think that Russell Moore's term "convictional kindness" put forward in his recent book *Onward: Engaging the Culture Without Losing the Gospel* is a more helpful descriptor. Moore says, "Civility is passive; kindness is active and strategic."<sup>52</sup> Moore points us to the example of Christ, referring to Jesus as a "gentle steamroller" who not only "rebukes and exposes" but also "seeks to save, not condemn."<sup>53</sup>

If we consider someone a brother in Christ, and come to think what they've written or said denies a major standard of Christian orthodoxy, then,

in the spirit of civil kindness, the posture of the theological educator as Shepherd should prioritize first a face-to-face meeting or phone call instead of a citation of condemnation in one's public musings. Here are two reasons why:

First, to post online such a weighty conclusion about another seems to under-dignify the seriousness of the claim. I have to think that the Gentlemen Theologians of Nicole's generation would have a hard time watching such take place as it has in our public venues.

How much better would it be for such weighty claims first to be expressed in private and in person. There are more biblical and churchly ways of handling such matters rather than laying them before a watching world (1 Cor 6:4).

Second, I think Nicole's "earning the right to criticize" is a most appropriate point of slowness in many debates that seem to rush to draw up Axis and Allies of digital articles in crowded theological theater.

## The Virtue of Slowness for a Shepherd

The theological educator has the opportunity to shepherd with kindness and civility—to show us what careful scholarship looks like and to model slowness of speech (James 1:19). This is countercultural in an age where most theological discussion feels a lot like that crowded breakfast room in a three-star hotel with family members and strangers talking past one another or at one another—and worse when it escalates too fast to public claims of heresy. There are times to stand and be counted and to speak, but most of the time, it is wise and Shepherd-like, to wait and refrain.

Following the "Slow Food" movement, the authors of the recent book, *The Slow Professor*, argue that the state of the faculty today needs to be challenged to slow

<sup>51</sup>Richard Mouw, *Uncommon Decency: Christian Civility in an Uncivil World* (IVP, 1992), 37-38.

<sup>52</sup>Russell Moore, *Onward: Engaging the Culture Without Losing the Gospel* (B&H Books, 2015), 194.

<sup>53</sup>Ibid., 196.

down.<sup>54</sup> The authors are speaking against “the corporate university” but their critique of frantic pace and stress is applicable to the theological educator.

For the theological educator does not have any problem finding or feeling like there are more things to do than he can handle. And we should press, work hard, and pursue excellence and industry. We should strive to be “power plants.” My challenge here is that the theological educator as Shepherd should also do some things slow to balance out our frantic pace and to ensure excellence in the important things. This might also be called *Deep Work*,<sup>55</sup> or you might hear it referenced in counsel to find “one thing” and devote your life to that. These approaches are good, but the key is finding the strategy that helps achieve actual balance and slowness.

In my own effort as a theological educator to practice the slowness of a Shepherd,

- I read some things slow. My aim is for my daily reading of the Bible and some books to go slow. This intentional slowness removes the pressure of “finishing” and allows me to listen, take notes, and make connections of thoughts that I do not make when reading fast.
- I use technology to aid in slowness. Much like Neil Postman, I “admire technological ingenuity but do not think it represents the highest possible form of human achievement.”<sup>56</sup> Thus, I am eager to adopt new applications that work for me and allow me to slow down. I use “to-do” lists, digital notes, and news feed readers. I work hard to eliminate all “notifications” and seek to control technology.
- I do many things fast. For things that should not require much time, I work to ensure they do not. I spend time strategizing how the work for one

project might be useful for two to three other projects. I listen to most podcasts at double the speed. For books that I can “read through” rather than read, I do. I set deadlines for almost every task imaginable, seek to meet those deadlines whether I am ready or not, and then move on to the next one. All of this allows me to slow down and spend time on the items (and people) that require and deserve my time.

- I work to be content with things unfinished. Some years ago, I found freedom in this piece of advice from Gary Riebe-Estrella, “If a dean wants to sleep at night, it is necessary to identify and accept the role of chief academic officer.”<sup>57</sup> That is, there is an aspect to the life of a theological educator where a ‘zero inbox’ goal is not possible. By this I do not mean that we should be content with half-finished projects. Rather, I mean, often the most productive thing a theological educator can do is grow to be content to leave a project until the next day rather than rushing to do poor work. The theological educator should be faithful to shepherd projects through to their end and on time, but should seek to do so as a part of a balanced life.<sup>58</sup> Regularly, I leave my desk and inbox with much accomplished but much more still to do, and I have had to work to be content with that by keeping the longer term goals of accomplishment in view.

In all of this the theological educator as a Gentlemen Shepherd should work diligently in all tasks, large and small, for the glory of God (1 Cor 10:31), whether working fast or slow.

## **The Theological Educator as Sherpa: The Invisible Sherpa Who Serves and Points**

<sup>54</sup> Maggie Berg and Barbara K. Seeber, *The Slow Professor* (University of Toronto, 2016).

<sup>55</sup> Cal Newport, *Deep Work: Rules for Focus in a Distracted World* (Grand Central, 2016).

<sup>56</sup> Neil Postman, *Technopoly: The Surrender of Culture to Technology* (Vintage, 1992), 184.

<sup>57</sup> Gary Riebe-Estrella, “The Dean as Administrator: It’s All a Matter of Relationships,” in Kathleen D. Billman and Bruce C. Birch, *C(H)AOS Theory: Reflections of Chief Academic Officers in Theological Education* (Eerdmans, 2011), 253.

<sup>58</sup> Jim Hunt, “10 Years as a Provost,” *Inside Higher Education*, August 24, 2009.



In Kathmandu, Kami Rita owns the record for scaling Mt. Everest at 22 times.<sup>59</sup> Rita is a climbing Sherpa employed by elite mountain climbers to aid them in their ascent of the world's most treacherous peaks. Growing up in a village near the base of Mt. Everest, Rita and his siblings learned early the trade of guiding and surviving the feats that many often start but do not complete. The task of the theological educator in caring for and leading students to survive the feat of their educational goals mirrors the task of a climbing Sherpa in several ways.

The theological educator cares best for his students when he adopts the lowly posture of a Sherpa. With this identity in mind, the educator can serve without conceding any ounce of experience or rank. The Sherpa, as the result of his years of experience, is the best one fit to serve. Just as the Sherpa comes alongside his clients and helps organize, direct, assemble, and lead, the theological educator does the same for students. The Sherpa is not a drill instructor or dictator leading by bravado or instilling fear in his clients, rather he educates and serves (Mark 10:45).

One of the prime ways the theological educator, in and out of the classroom, has the opportunity to serve students as a Sherpa is by taking time with them and by making time for them. Often this is as simple as modeling patience and understanding with any question asked in class or in public. When students see that even the most mundane of questions are taken with seriousness and without smirk in public, they are more willing to ask their vital questions in private. The theological educator serves students well when the student feels and knows they have an audience and a sincere ear in their professor and are not a burden or waste of time.

In my classes, I make a point early in the term to let students know that their questions and interests are not only a high priority for me, but also something I enjoy and value. As many of my students are aware, I have a full schedule of meetings and faculty concerns; this means that sometimes more diffident students shy away from

approaching me. I work to preclude this conclusion by telling them that time with students is for me like an intravenous reviving of my calling and outlook in the midst of several other tasks and meetings. I try to convey that I need them to approach me and ask me questions as a help for balance in my life.

Related to this, the theological educator can serve and assist his students well by working hard to ensure he is communicating often and with clarity to them. Just as clear communication from the Sherpa to those he is assisting is vital for a successful ascent, the theological educator must not assume he is connecting with his students. To put it another way, while relying upon "It says it in the syllabus" might be enough to deflect claims of professorial malpractice, it is not enough if the professor desires to serve and lead students toward growth and development. The theological educator as Sherpa assists students best when he strives to communicate in multiple ways, many venues, and with repetition to ensure that even that one student, who seems to care the least, comes to appreciate the course and subject matter.

In addition to serving, the Sherpa also accomplishes his task with excellence when he does so in a decreasing fashion (John 3:30). When a climbing Sherpa leads his client up the path to take his final few steps to the summit, the climber, in one sense, should be celebrating to the degree that he forgets the Sherpa is even there. He has mastered the mountain, followed the instructions, implemented his training, and accomplished something rare and significant. In the end, yes, the Sherpa assisted him up the mountain, but the climber did the climbing. Perhaps this is most evident in the moment when the climber poses for a photo at the summit. The Sherpa often is the one, as his job, to take the photo, not to be in the photo. For the Sherpa has done this many times before and will soon again lead others to this very point on another trip. For now, it is the climber's moment and accomplishment.

Such it is for the theological educator who cares for

<sup>59</sup> "Sherpa guide Kami Rita climbs Everest for record 22nd time" *The Guardian*, May 16, 2018.

students as a Sherpa. The educator's posture is that of one who is gladly decreasing in presence and influence with time. As Jim Hunt counsels, the theological educator should think of himself like instructional gravity. "If you think of the qualities of gravity, then you have a fairly good image of what you should do in your position. You help hold things in place so that they do not escape the institutional orbit and you are invisible."<sup>60</sup> The theological educator serves, assists, prepares, and instructs the students—i.e. holds them together, but it is the students who do the work and who fulfill the requirements for graduating with their degree.

The theological educator, in this sense, should, at some point in the student's life and career, be forgotten, even while what was taught and given to the student remains. The theological educator's legacy is not that he is remembered, but that the students have adopted what was taught and are changed by it for the service of others. At graduation, the theological educator should be the one taking the photo for he has done this before and will soon again lead others to that point after another semester.

Yet, though striving for invisibility, the theological educator also cares well as a Sherpa by his pointing. The climbing Sherpa cannot do his job with success if he does not point his client up and down the mountain. Sometimes this pointing involves directing the climber away from danger or leading them to pause with patience while a storm clears. Sometimes this pointing is designed to motivate the climber to persevere or renew his perspective so as not to drift from the task in action or thought. Sometimes the Sherpa points at himself so the climber can see how to climb or what he should do next.

The theological educator who seeks to care for students as a Sherpa should also take care to point in these ways. However, the danger for the instructor is that he can spend too much time pointing at himself. This can be inadvertent, but without care, the theological educator can easily view himself as Auteur and the students as

a fan club. Instead, like the Sherpa, the theological educator should point outward most and for a purpose. The theological educator, in this sense, is like a poet, about who C. S. Lewis reminds, "The poet is not a man who asks me to look at him; he is a man who says 'look at that' and points; the more I follow the pointing of his finger the less I can possibly see of him."<sup>61</sup>

## The Value of an Experienced Sherpa

The theological educator is able to carry out the task of caring for students as a Sherpa only through the knowledge and wisdom that comes from experience. The climbing Sherpa spends a lifetime learning his trade from others more experienced. He ventures on climbs several times a year throughout his life; only thereby does he build up stamina and experience. This discipline and investment in his craft is what allows him to come to see the most challenging things as routine. The climbing Sherpa is an expert in his field, and this status is something he has earned over time.

Such it should be with the theological educator. Rare should it be that a brilliance alone equals readiness. For even the sharpest of climbing Sherpas are not ready to bear the weight and responsibility of leading a climb without tested and proven experience. The theological educator should welcome mentorship in teaching, writing, serving, and caring for students. His posture should be that of deference to those who have been "climbing" for years. The theological educator is an expert in his field only when he has mastered the content and also spent time teaching, writing, and putting that content into practice.

Further, the climbing Sherpa is seen as a professional only when he matures to the point of no longer seeking the praise of his clients or is enamored by the allure or fame or status. The theological educator as Sherpa, likewise, should not live for the approval of students even while he seeks to serve and assist them. The students need to be led and guided by a professional, not simply

<sup>60</sup> Hunt, "10 Years as a Provost."

<sup>61</sup> C. S. Lewis, "The Personal Heresy in Criticism," in *The Personal Heresy: A Controversy* (Oxford University Press, 1939), 11.

a friend who decided to join them for a “climb.” The theological educator as a professional is not impressed by knowledge alone or the fame of another scholar. Rather, over time, he has gained the virtue of discernment that comes only after seeing many other professors and scholars come and go.

The best of climbing Sherpas are marked by their wisdom that comes with creativity and longevity. Sherpas who climb year after year gain knowledge, but also experience. The experience of serving many different clients in a variety of conditions builds a storehouse of wisdom that cannot be taught or purchased. Further, many of the technological advancements that aid mountain climbers today are the direct result of Sherpas providing insight and ideas due to what they have seen and endured. For the experienced Sherpa has endured much, including—sometimes—the tragedy of people falling.

The theological educator as Sherpa, too, is rewarded with wisdom that only comes with creativity and longevity. Years of serving and caring for students yields an opportunity for theological educators to grow and improve if they are willing to learn. The longer they serve, the theological educator can help shape the future of his field by sharing what he has learned and how he has adapted over the years to improve his craft. Innovation in instruction, educational delivery methods, and the use of technology, can all benefit from the influence of wisdom from seasoned theological educators. Further, the theological educator with earned wisdom can care for students the most, simply because of what they have seen and heeded. For longevity in serving brings wisdom to aid their students from falling (Jn 16:1).

## The Task of Theological Educators

In 1943, C. S. Lewis gave three lectures in Durham later published in one volume as *The Abolition of Man*.<sup>62</sup> The first

of these lectures he titled “Men Without Chests,” aimed as a critique of a recent volume that argued for the subjective nature of meaning in a book for school children.<sup>63</sup> The authors of that book, Lewis summarized, likely were attempting to “fortify the minds of young people against emotion.”<sup>64</sup>

However, Lewis countered, the challenge of the day for young people is not restraining or starving them of emotion, but rather awakening it and directing it toward what is just and true. The authors of the children’s book, Lewis concludes, are trying to build the intellect, but carve out the heart. In the end, what they create are men with minds but no heart. Men with intellect, but without chests, and yet we “expect of them virtue and enterprise.” Herein Lewis posits his corrective: “The task of the modern educator is not to cut down jungles but to irrigate deserts.”<sup>65</sup>

For the theological educator, the task is no different. In the twenty-first century there are jungles of competing worldviews, arguments, and approaches to theological education. In as much as the theological educator attempts only to cut these down as an intellectual exercise apart from understanding how theological instruction is a matter of the heart, he is only cutting that which will grow back. The question to ask, rather, is how should the theological educator irrigate the dry hearts of his students and stir their affections to that which is just and true.

The care the theological educator gives in response to criticism, how he prioritizes his time, and the way he guides students succeeds in so far as the educator cares for how he goes about these matters, both in how he practices them, but also his posture as he proceeds. I have presented here the metaphors of Gentlemen Shepherds and Invisible Sherpas as examples, but whatever the metaphor, what matters most might just be how students observe the theological educator at breakfast. •

<sup>62</sup> C. S. Lewis, *The Abolition of Man* (New York: Harper Collins, 1944).

<sup>63</sup> Lewis referred to the volume anonymously as *The Green Book*, but the volume was Alec King and Martin Ketley, *The Control of Language: A Critical Approach to Reading and Writing* (New York: Longmans, Green, 1939). See Walter Hooper, ed., *The Collected Letters of C. S. Lewis, Vol 2* (Harper Collins, 2004), 561n59.

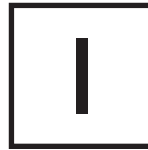
<sup>64</sup> Lewis, *The Abolition of Man*, 13.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, 13-14.

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# The Theology of the Bible and the Mission of the Church

By Jonathan Leeman



I remember standing in my neighbor's backyard, where he was busy planting a tree. My neighbor, who belonged to a liberal mainline church, looked up at me at one point and said in all seriousness, "Hey, I'm doing church work!"

Wait, what? Is planting trees "church work"?

The answer depends on what you think the church's mission is. What has God sent the church into the world to *do*. Has he sent the church to fulfill the Great Commission by making disciples? Or has he sent the church into the world to do more than that—including everything from planting trees, to caring for the poor, to doing justice.

## The Mission Is Broad and Narrow

For several decades now this has been something of a controversial topic among Christians. Some offer a narrow definition, which focuses on the Great Commission and making disciples of Christ. Others offer a broad definition, which includes making but also emphasizes every aspect of *being a disciple of Christ*.

Missiologist David Hesselgrave offers the narrow definition: "*Great Commission mission is uniquely ours and requires us to make disciples by preaching, baptism, and teaching the peoples of the earth.*"<sup>66</sup> The narrow definition, clearly, places Jesus' Great Commission in the foreground.

<sup>66</sup> *Paradigms in Conflict: 10 Key Questions in Christian Missions Today* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel, 2005), 348.

Meanwhile, John Stott and Christopher Wright provide a good example of a broad view of the church's mission, and they point not just to the Great Commission but to all of Scripture. They write: *“The word mission... is a properly comprehensive word, embracing everything that God sends his people into the world to do.’ And that ‘everything’ is indeed broad and inclusive, if we take account of what the whole Bible shows us....”*<sup>67</sup>

Part of the challenge of choosing between narrow and broad is that both sides appeal to biblically-informed intuitions. The narrow definition appeals to the intuition that there must be *some* distinction between what the whole church must do and what I as an individual Christian must do. We don't ordinarily refer to planting trees as “church work.” If we put planting trees into the church budget, by what criteria should we leave anything out? The broad-definition camp, however, appeals to the sensibilities that suggest that words without deeds aren't worth much. What pastor would ever stand in front of a congregation on Sunday and say, “It is *not* your mission, church, to love God and neighbor”!

In some ways, it's as if the broad and narrow camp are looking at different things: like comparing the mission of a law or medical school versus the mission of an actual lawyer or doctor (or both school and practitioner). One focuses on teaching, the other focuses on being or doing.

Yet there's something more going on in this conversation. It's not simply about a narrow versus a broad view of the church's work. Behind that conversation is a deeper, more profound conversation about salvation, and what human beings most urgently need salvation from. We find wisdom for that conversation from tracing the storyline of the Bible in two distinct—but complementary—ways. It is in this deployment of biblical theology, I argue, that we come to a richer, fuller understanding of what exactly it is that God's people are to do in our fallen order.

## Two Complementary Storylines

<sup>67</sup> Italics original, *ibid.*, 38-39.

<sup>68</sup> Gregory K. Beale, *A New Testament Biblical Theology: The Unfolding of the Old Testament in the New* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2011), 386, also 479.

## That Fill Out Our Understanding of Mission

### Story 1: Ruling as Sons—A Kingly Storyline

**Creation.** As we thought about in an earlier session, the story of the Bible is a *kingly* story. Adam and Eve were created in God's image, I said, to rule as king and queen over creation. Like a son who acts like his father and follows in his father's professional footsteps (Gen. 5:1ff; Luke 3:38), men and women are designed to represent God's character and rule over creation (Gen. 1:28).

**Fall.** Sadly, Adam and Eve rejected God's rule and go to work ruling on their own behalf, and so God banishes them from his presence. They still image God's rule, but it's a perverse image and distorted rule.

**Israel.** Wonderfully, God, in his mercy, had a plan to both save and use a group of people for his original purposes for creation—to rule on his behalf and display his glory. Where he commanded Adam, “Be fruitful and multiply,” he promised Abraham and his descendants, “I will multiply you and make you fruitful” (see Gen. 12, Gen. 15). God himself will fulfill among a special people what he commands of all people, so that the special people might display God's own character and rule. Sadly, again, Abraham's descendants, Israel and its kings, chased after other images and failed to display God's own righteousness, justice, and love. So God cast them out of his presence and land.

**Christ.** Wonderfully, again, God sent another son, Jesus. He let this Son be tempted by Satan, just like Adam. But this Son did what Adam and Israel didn't do. He perfectly obeyed God's Word and in so doing recapitulated redemptive history. He redid it, fulfilling the commission given to Adam “to subdue and rule, to multiply and create and to fill.”<sup>68</sup> Christ was the perfect image of God and the perfect Son (Col. 1:15). Adam's perverse-imaging problem solved.

**Church.** Not only that, Jesus promised to give his kingdom to a people. These people, the church, God predestined “to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn among many brothers” (Rom. 8:29, ESV). “Because [they] are his sons, God sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, the Spirit who calls out, ‘Abba, Father’” (Gal. 4:6). No longer are they slaves but possess the full rights of sons (v. 7). These sons are promised that, just as they “have borne the image of the earthly man,” so they shall also “bear the image of the heavenly man” (1 Cor. 15:49; also 1 John 3:2). Not only this, but they will also reign with God in eternity (in 2 Tim. 2:12; Rev. 20:6—literally, “be kings with”).

So let me sum up. What does God call the church to do? What is its mission?

To be sons. To be God’s restored images. To rule like God rules. To display the character and likeness and image and glory of the Son and the Father in heaven. The Father is a peacemaker, so be peacemakers, church. The Father loves his enemies, so love your enemies, church. The Father and Jesus are one, so be one, church. The Father is perfect, so be perfect, church. The Father sent Jesus, so Jesus sends you, church.

This mission, to be sure, is a broad one. It involves our entire lives. The church’s work, you might say, is an image-recovery work. It is to live as the transformed humanity or a redeemed culture.

### **Story 2: Meditating God’s Judgments—A Priestly Storyline**

That said, there’s more to the story. In fact, let me tell the same Bible story again, but this time adding another character: the priest.

**Creation.** God didn’t just give Adam and Eve the job of king, he gave them the job of priest by calling them to “work” and “watch over” the Garden, two activities that would one day occupy Israel’s priests in the temple (Gen. 2:15, CSB; Num 3:7–8; 8:26; 18:5–6).<sup>69</sup> A priest works to keep the place where God dwells consecrated to God.

He’s to keep unholy intruders, like lying serpents, from entering the place God dwells.

**Fall.** Adam fails. God calls Noah to act as a priest by separating clean and unclean animals and offering a sacrifice.

**Israel.** God then calls the whole nation of Israel a “kingdom of priests” (Ex. 19:6), which they’re to do by keeping God’s law. And he highlights the nature of priestly work by establishing a line of priests who mediate God’s judgments through performing sacrifices, protecting the ritual purity of God’s dwelling place in the temple, separating clean and unclean, and teaching the people God’s law.

At each step, priests were to draw the line between the inside and outside of God’s people: Adam was to do that, as was Noah, as were the Levitical priests.

Again, both the priests and Israel as a whole failed in their priestly vocation.

**Christ.** Wonderfully, Jesus comes as that savior and perfect high priest who declares and enacts the judgments of God. He also comes as the Passover Lamb who paid the price for sin by shedding his own blood. So Jesus solves not just humanity’s perverse-imaging problem as a king, but also its guilt, shame, and separation problem as a priest. At the cross Christ forgave his people’s trespasses by canceling “the charge of our legal indebtedness, which stood against us and condemned us; he has taken it away, nailing it to the cross” (Col. 2:13–14).

**Church.** Christ also unites a people—the church—to himself through the new covenant in his blood. This covenant grants them both forgiveness and the Holy Spirit so that they might walk according to God’s law. No longer is there a mediating class of priests because all are priests. They would be a “kingdom of priests,” said Peter (1 Cor. 3:16; 1 Peter 2:5, 9). All are now responsible to keep the holy place of God’s dwelling consecrated to the Lord,

<sup>69</sup> Greg Beale, *The Temple and the Church’s Mission: A Biblical Theology of the Dwelling Place of God* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP: 2004), 66–87.



clean separated from unclean, the inside marked off from the outside. And what is that dwelling place? It's not a building. It's the people. The church and its members are that temple. Paul therefore commands them to "come out from them and be separate. . . . Touch no unclean thing, and I will receive you" (2 Cor. 6:17).

Christ may have authorized his people to go like conquering kings into all nations, but he also authorized them to make priestly judgments as they go. Wielding the keys of the kingdom given Matthew 16 and 18, which are a priestly activity says Greg Beale, God's people once more must draw a line between the holy and the unholy. They do this by teaching everything Christ commanded and by marking off Christ's holy people through baptism and the Lord's Supper. They bind and loose on earth what's bound and loosed in heaven. The church corporately exercises a declarative authority that the church individually does not, just like a judge in a courtroom can make declarations that a U.S. Citizen cannot, even if both use the same words: "I find this person to be guilty." The two ordinances both picture Christ's sacrifice as well as constitute the visible church, publicly naming who belongs to Father, Son, and Spirit and thereby showing the nations who is "in" and who

is "out." As with the Old Testament priests, this task of making disciples also involves teaching everything Christ had commanded.

Let me sum up this second, priestly storyline. What does God all the church to do? What is its mission? To make disciples. To draw a line between the inside and the outside. To render judgments on the *what* and the *who* of the gospel like priests—to formally declare, "This is a true gospel confession, and these are true gospel confessors." But now we're *not* talking about the church as its individual members and what they do all week. We're talking about the gathered assembly and its unique corporate task and authority. There is priestly work for the individual Christian to do, just like there is kingly work for the gathered corporate church to do. But, basically exercising the keys and baptizing and giving the Supper are not individual Christian activities. They are church activities, where two or three are gathered in Christ's name.

This mission, to be sure, is a narrow one. Narrowly speaking, the mission of the church—church as corporate actor—is to make disciples by declaring or mediating God's judgments. It does this through gospel

	Narrow mission of a church-as-organized-collective (the church jointly)	Broad mission of a church-as-its-members (the church severally)
<i>Biblical theme:</i>	Priest (or kingly priest)	King (or priestly king)
<i>Authorization:</i>	Mediate heaven's judgements (binding/loosing)	Rule as sons
<i>Actions:</i>	Speak judge-like words of formal separation identification instruction	Live as witnesses in word and deed
<i>Primary domain:</i>	The gathering where Christ specially dwells	Both the gathering and the nations
<i>Illustration:</i>	Embassy	Ambassador
<i>Summary:</i>	<b>Make disciples</b>	<b>Be a disciple</b>

proclamation, baptism and the Lord's Supper, and biblical instruction.

## **Synthesis: Clarification on Broad and Narrow Ecclesial Mission**

Just as the Old Testament king and priest had different job assignments, so we need to pay attention to two different moments in the life of a church, to different hats its members will wear. Remember my argument at the beginning? Defining the mission of the church requires us to define what we mean by “the church.” We've simply *got* to clarify what we're talking about. The church as its individual members have a broad mission: being disciples. Being image-bearing sons. And the members always undertake this kingly activity, whether gathered or scattered. It involves their whole lives as they work to present the church as a model society, a transformed people, an outpost of heaven.

Yet those same individuals also undertake a related but distinct job—the job of making disciples. This might begin individually as members evangelize. But ultimately the members can only undertake this priestly job when gathered together and are acting as an organized collective. Only together can they render God's judgments on the what and who of the gospel.

God authorizes a *church-as-organized-collective and the church-as-its-members* another way.

God authorizes a *church-as-organized-collective* with a distinct priestly authority to publicly separate sinners from the world and to reconcile them to himself and his people through re-naming and teaching. *Christ* authorizes a *church-as-its-members* with a kingly authority to represent him as God-imaging sons and citizens, whether gathered together or scattered apart.

The narrow employs priestly words of formal separation, identification, and instruction. We do this in our preaching and in the ordinances. The broad rules and lives as sons of the king, representing the heavenly Father in all of life's words and deeds. The narrow protects the holy place where God dwells, which is his temple, the church. The broad pushes God's witness into new territory, expanding where his rule is acknowledged. The narrow

mission is to be an embassy, while the broad mission is to be an ambassador.

We need the narrow answer (making disciples) and we need the broad answer (being disciples). We need the king and the priest, because, really, the work of each cannot be separate from one another. We need both stories.

## **An Eschatological Wrinkle and Our Most Urgent Task**

Ultimately, the Bible's story of salvation calls for a broad and narrow mission. But the eschatological wrinkle suggests the narrow mission of making disciples deserves special attention because the world's most urgent and central problem is theological—the fact that we have offended God. To downplay or diminish the narrow mission of the local church and its officers effectively downplays or diminishes the need for all humanity to get inside of that elevator—to get saved and sanctified. It also blurs the line between the world and the church, damnation and salvation. It risks misidentifying the unholy as holy.

Furthermore, when we fail to recognize that this is humanity's biggest problem, we tend to over-estimate what the church can do. We tend to think that we really can make things better. We really can bring heaven to earth. We can transform the culture and redeem the city.

Downplaying humanity's theological problem, and flattening the special urgency we should give to making disciples, leads to a kind of utopianism.

## **Takeaway Lessons**

Here are eight practical lessons church members and pastors can take away from this discussion.

1. *The first step of the Christian life is to be baptized into membership in a church.*
2. *Acting together as a church, prioritize preaching the gospel to those on the inside and reaching the unreached on the outside.*
3. *Churches should carefully practice church membership and discipline.*
4. *Churches must preach about heaven and hell, the new creation and eternal condemnation.*
5. *Churches should sing and pray often about heaven and the new creation.*

6. Church members should live together as the church not just on the Lord's Day but every day (see Acts 2:42-46).

7. Church members should share the gospel and call people to repent and believe.

8. Churches don't just need a mission, they need missions and boundary-crossing missionaries.

What's the mission of the church?

Collectively, it's to make disciples or citizens of Christ's kingdom. Individually, it's to live as disciples and citizens of Christ's kingdom.

Or let me put it like this: The mission of the church is to be a light among the nations by proclaiming the gospel of Jesus Christ, living as the true humanity and a transformed community, and inviting the nations into that light and transformation. •

*Jonathan Leeman is Editorial Director of 9Marks and the author of The Church and the Surprising Offense of God's Love, Political Church, and The Rule of Love. This essay is adapted with permission from Four Views on the Church's Mission, (Zondervan, ed. Jason Sexton).*

## In Ashes, Build: Notes on a Theory of Culture

By Owen Strachan



During his decades-long run as editor of *First Things*, Richard John Neuhaus wrote long-form, single-subject articles with regularity. What caught my own eye when I first encountered Neuhaus's work was his back-of-the-journal column entitled "While We're at It," a catch-all commentary on matters related to religion, culture, theology, politics, and the public square. In commenting on institutions in this manner, Neuhaus created his own in-journal institution in journalistic form.

I am neither Catholic nor Neuhaus, but I have long mused on the fun it might be to try my hand at Neuhaus's venture. In some ways, Neuhaus's column anticipated the digressive and enjoyable element of social media; he was Tweeting (albeit in paragraphs) before Jack Dorsey made his first million. My thought takes me astream from Neuhaus and his ecclesial tradition, yet I here—in the first issue of *Permanent Things*—offer from a position of respect my own take on a running commentary of matters related to theology, culture, and the public square.

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The first thing that we should say is

that Christian is fundamentally a conservative faith. That is, in order to offer something to the world, we must conserve what God has handed down to us (see 2 Timothy 1:13). Conservatism in this sense does not refer to a stubborn willingness to face the future; by contrast, conservatism necessarily faces the future with Word and gospel firmly in hand, expecting the Spirit to freshly bless the family of Christ and newly regenerate the followers of Satan.

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The Christian faith is thus progressive, but only in the sense that it offers the citizens of the present the wisdom of the past. Unhitch yourself and your congregation from the history and truth God has authored, and you have little but good feelings and can-do spirituality to offer your hearers. The problem with “unhitching” theology ala Andy Stanley is that it leaves a cart—to honor the metaphor on its own terms—without any ballast, any firmness, any solidity. That which is “unhitched” is seemingly free, but free to do what? To careen, to upend, to crumble into pieces after meeting an immovable object.

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Christ’s church operates from a different foundation than our hard-modern (a better term for today than “postmodern,” really) culture does. The church fundamentally seeks to hold fast to the trustworthy word. It does not shut the word up as a keepsake, of course; it brings the wisdom of the Word into the rushing chaos of the current day. Our “progressive” culture, by contrast, fundamentally seeks to divest itself from the past. It breaks with tradition. It is not only, however, the specific dogmas of past days that progressivism rejects. It is the entire mindset of honoring the past, learning from it, and stewarding it.

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Honoring the past is not the same as baptizing it. We should never confuse the doctrinal and cultural conservatism of the Christian movement with nostalgia. The gospel of grace frees us from all delusions and

counterfeits. It helps us, as just one example, see clear when it comes to the failings of past leaders, churches, denominations, and institutions. We deal honestly with these real iniquities and transgressions, some of them decades-long, some of them baked into the very fabric of our institutions. As we have learned, the wounds have not all healed in the West, in America, in and the church. Christ in us means that we are free to acknowledge and reckon with sin in all its poisonous manifestations. Honesty is a gift, not a curse.

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We must, however, distinguish honesty from progressive demolition-derbying. It is right to identify and lament the sins of our forebears. But it is an act of nihilism to bring a torch to a library. By this I mean that it is the height of folly to look into history and see in it only items of condemnation and deserved destruction. The current angle of approach to Western history in our universities and colleges, for example, looks less and less like honest and respectful inquiry, and more and more like targeted and wanton evisceration. Part of Christian education is teaching students to handle the past with care, discretion, self-awareness, humility, respect, charity, and balance. If fewer and fewer in the broader academy seem willing to form students in this way, we must not fail to do so in the church.

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The Christian operates in a different mold than the non-Christian. We do not think as the unbeliever thinks, or speak as the unbeliever speaks, or desire as the unbeliever desires. We have given up our obedience to the flesh and fleshly passions (Ephesians 2:1-3). We cannot only critique and tear down; we have the responsibility, all of us, to help steward the wisdom of the Word, and to guard through our meaningful congregational membership the good deposit which is the gospel. We are not critics first and foremost, then; we are not doubters, or haters (as the kids say). We are *believers*. We are earnest in our nature, hopeful in our demeanor, charitable in our speech, theocentric in our moment-by-moment existence.

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Having said what I just did, sometimes Christians can be downright chippy. And sometimes unbelievers take us aback by their kindnesses. The fact that there are soldiers and policemen out there who are willing to die if necessary to keep people like us safe on a daily basis should not fail to cross our mind on a regular basis. Many of these people have no true Christian faith, and desperately need the Lord—yet they act unselfishly in at least one important area of their life.

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All the foregoing means in my synthetic judgment that the Christian is the true progressive. We face the future with the treasures of the past. We conserve what is good in order to bless future generations with it. We do so not from arrogance or anger, but from love, the love of God and the love of neighbor (Matthew 22:34-39). This love unites us, for it is grounded in the truth. The love of God creates a family of men and women from every tribe, tongue, nation, race, ethnicity, and people group. This is in contradistinction to what falsehood and false teaching does—such untruth accomplishes the terrible work of division and hatred and distrust. In promoting sound doctrine, the Christian acts progressively, understood in the right way, and helps foster unity where all worldly teaching foments separation and hostility.

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Understanding ourselves in Godward terms (as I am at pains to do) puts us in unmistakable disagreement with secular culture in our time. We are trained and even commanded to rethink ourselves from the roots up. Descartes has won the debate, albeit in terms he would scarcely recognize. What he meant metaphysically our non-Christian peers interpret bodily: consciousness is centered in me, and I am capable of reworking that I that I am into the me that I desire to be. The social corollary of this epistemological conviction is that society has no innate structure, but may be—must be—leveled right down to the foundations. Identity for both the self and the social order is not inherited; it is created from the ground up.

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The instinct mentioned above inheres at the bodily level in the vision of transgenderism, at the sexual level in the mantra of homosexuality and polyamory, and at the economic level in the social-media takedowns of democratic socialism. In each of these, existing order must be re-thought and even re-formed. Order, it turns out, is the enemy of our time—the order of God especially. Does the average millennial or member of Generation Z spot the connection?

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If you train your students only *what* to think but now *how* to think (critical reasoning, presuppositional interrogation, the law of non-contradiction, etc and so on), you have set them up as plump targets for those who would genuinely instruct them.

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Here witness much of the phenomenon of Jordan Peterson, who is not so much a savant (though he is very gifted and a more-than-worthy conversation partner) as he is a traditional professor of the humanities who has dared to speak in public. The kind of pedagogy displayed by Peterson is suffused with learning and humor and uncommon natural wisdom, yes, but it is not hugely distinguishable from what tenured scholars at numerous colleges and universities dispense on a weekly basis. The liberal arts! They are very revolution itself.

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When no one teaches the truth, we note, it really does become revolutionary. And dangerous—it becomes dangerous for ideologues (and very advantageous for those Christians paying attention). Witness the rise of the neo-conservatives two generations ago. The same will recur in our time, I predict, with the hard-modernists who currently set the speech codes on the modern campus, police the entertainment arrayed on our screens, and run the newsrooms of our modern digital conglomerates (note my full agreement with Michael Plato's shrewd assessment of late modernity earlier in this journal).

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Side note: are newsrooms still a thing? Will they be retitled “opinion rooms” in this, the Era of the Hot Take?

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Free speech as commonly understood and policed today is not really free speech at all. It’s the freedom to obey speech codes.

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Again on Peterson, I attended his Kansas City lecture. He was speaking from the backdrop of *12 Rules for Life*, of course. The moment that caught in my mind was when he observed the need to “tell the truth,” but then realized the limits of his own epistemology and metaphysics (such as they are). Nearly shouting, he said, “the best we can do is *not lie!*” That, in a sentence, sums up all you need to know about the operative worldview of Peterson. Without God, that really is the best you can do: not lie.

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But also on Peterson: I am reminded of Jesus’ rather enigmatic remark to the scribe who answered well: “You are not far from the kingdom of God” (Mark 12:34). So, I wonder, with Peterson. Let us pray for him and his many followers. (And let us engage them and the good questions they are asking.)

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As witnessed above, I recall the way Kevin Vanhoozer, my hermeneutics professor at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School (during my PhD work), began our study of interpretation. He did not start with the deconstructionists, the Enlightenment, or the Reformers. As mentioned in the interview, Vanhoozer started the class by mapping the intellectual virtues, humility among them. Coming from a luminescent mind, that was formative. Our study of hermeneutics did not begin and end with analysis and swift judgment pronounced on the bad guys. It began with an assessment of our own heart. Were we prepared *spiritually* for the task before us? Were

we *godly enough* to offer theological critique?

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The difference between Vanhoozer’s starting point and that urged upon us by a social media-driven culture is chasmic in nature. The Bible would teach us that it is good to speak when one is ready and equipped to speak, a state we reach after conversion, sanctification, testing, and recognition. This has special reference in the New Testament to the elder of the church, the only figure formally appointed to serve as a teacher of Christ’s local body (1 Tim 3:1-7; Titus 1:5-9). Teachers in the New Testament’s vision are not those who have signed up for an account and have opinions aplenty, with perhaps some identity-related accreditation mixed in (i.e., they are from a certain group). Teachers are those who have shown themselves to be godly men, able to provide spiritual leadership fired by theological truth of themselves, their families, and the church’s members.

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“Teachers”—or more accurately in contemporary terminology, “influencers”—are not accredited by anyone. That’s actually part of their platform. They are not a recognized authority; they are not necessarily an authority at all. In many cases, they have made their mark by challenging and goading and even rebuking established authority figures. The elder is marked by submission to God first and other elders second; the one who called to teach and shepherd the congregation is one who has proved his ability not merely to tender intellectual enlightenment, but to follow divine order, in this case the order of leadership yielded by the mind of very God himself. “Influencers” make their own order. This point is noteworthy: the modern influencer bucks the system, customarily, only to create his or her own system. Submission is still expected, often in an absolute form; doubt of the platformed star will not be tolerated (even as doubt of established authorities, even God, is very much encouraged); the “influencer” empowers his or her followers to spread the influencer’s brand with aplomb.

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The social-media star, whether evangelical or otherwise, is typically quick to speak, quick to anger, and slow to listen. This reverses the Jamesian paradigm. The Christian is commanded to be slow to speak, slow to anger, and quick to listen (James 1:19-20). Social media is not foundationally evil, I believe; we can use it for many good things, provided we bring Christian virtues and teachings to bear upon our usage. But we cannot miss that the single best way to amass a following and gain “influence” today is generally to upend biblical priorities and practice their very reverse.

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I find it fascinating how many figures—including some “influencers”—ascend to the pinnacle of earthly success, only to turn around and despise the world around them. We have watched as our culture has, if I may coin a word, “teenified” itself. By this I mean that we have replaced the mature adult as our archetype and now long to be teenagers. Many adult men now dress almost indistinguishably from their teenage sons; they use the same language, watch the same superhero movies, and wear the same sports jerseys. They are encouraged to look like boys: no facial hair, no chest hair, no gentlemanly dress. Many adult women strive to keep themselves looking like a teenage girl, and embrace the persona of a sassy cheerleader. They are overgrown girls, with the same hair color, PINK sweatpants, and clothing style as a high school sophomore. The persona adopted by both sexes is that of homecoming king and queen: above it all, lordly in manner, acting as if the world owes us what has been given to us.

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The Christian, by contrast, prays to be mature. Adulthood is good. Maturity is a blessing (1 Corinthians 13:11). All of life is a gift, not a deserved inheritance. If we are blessed with any measure of success, any chance to be a leader, any ability to persuade others for good ends, we do not cultivate an air of entitlement. We should exude a spirit akin to dazed euphoria—“Can you believe it? I get to teach here. I get to love these children on a daily basis. A church has called me—undeserving me!—to this pastoral role.” On it goes. All of life in

Christ is a gift. Doctrine matters tremendously for the way we live, doesn’t it?

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Some really do use their influence in a positive way on social media. As just one example, watching the movie *American Gospel* rocket across the Internet heartened many of us. What a well-done film. What an important message. With not much budget for promotion, and zero assistance from the mainstream media, *American Gospel* has made a real dent. Social media “influence” can and does do good. Here is hoping for a diffusion of excellent art in coming days that features a vibrant depiction of the truth of God.

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Art, by the way, did not originally signify “self-expression” as it commonly does today. The term art is derived from the Greek *arete*, meaning “virtue” or “excellence” (in accord with Köstenberger’s astute observations above). So art was the creative rendering and elegant embodiment of that which was good and true and praiseworthy.

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Speaking of beauty, it’s not merely found in the world. God is beautiful. God *is* beauty. (On this point I invite you to pore over Jonathan Edwards’s writings.) Read Psalm 27:4 afresh. There, young Christian artists, is a theological, metaphysical, epistemological, and spiritual foundation for attempting great creative feats for the glory of God. There are no clips on your wings; dream big, and go big.

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It is worth noting that creating works of beauty likely will not—in most cases, anyway—happen in an afternoon. Tolkien spent decades on *Lord of the Rings*. Part of what can help you in this endeavor is detaching regularly from devices. Devices distract us; in fact, the distractions become so common that it might be more appropriate to say that real life threatens to distract us from our distractions.

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Perhaps we do well to promote a vision of beauty and hope as much through images as through ideas. My father was a forester; he walked the woods of Maine for a living. He was responsible for putting together a conservation and management plan for a plot of land. In other words, he had to figure out how to tend an established order such that it would endure in days ahead—but not only endure, thrive. Conservatism in this respect did not mean keeping things as they always were; neither did it mean burning up the Maine pines so as to start anew, albeit in utopia. It meant stewardship; care; tearing out weeds; pruning what was majestic and old and worthy. So with us as believers, whether oriented to theological education, congregational health, or public square service.

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While we are disquisitively on the subject of trees, I cannot fail to note how central this motif is to Tolkien and Lewis alike. In both Middle Earth and Narnia, the characters always seem to be in or near a forest, site of what is growing and alive—but also the site where unseen dangers hide and crouch. I will not pursue the motif further, but will only offer this comment: I am so enchanted by these twin worlds that I sometimes feel as if I live in them—perhaps more in Middle Earth than in Narnia, much as I treasure each literary vision. To borrow Lewis’s term, *Lord of the Rings* brims with pure “Northernness”—transcendence, beauty, severity, fading but once great glory. Yet more than any creature in Middle Earth, I yearn to meet Aslan, to look into the face that is—impossibly—both terrible and kind.

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To extend the forest metaphor a moment: Roger Scruton speaks of the need for customs, values, and traditions to hold together a culture. Even among evangelicals, the angle taken with regard to anything that is not biblical writ itself is essentially that we may take it or leave it. We live in Christian freedom as blood-bought, resurrection-claimed men and women, but our attitude to customs and traditions ought not be indifference, let alone hostility. Culture is a fragile thing. Like a treasured tree,

we should treat it with respect as much as we possibly can, and even assume in general terms that it is better to conserve than to uproot.

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Having introduced the subject of fathers, let us note how frequently we hear today how hard “parenting” is. “Parenting,” it is worth pointing out, is a gender-neutral term; many of will use it in different settings, yes, but it is ideal whenever possible to speak of “fathers” and “mothers.” To be a father or mother is consummately self-sacrificial. It is not that fatherhood and motherhood (grounded in covenantal marriage, obviously) involves some scattered moments of self-death. It is that the entire venture is staked on self-death. Fatherhood and motherhood, summed up: self-sacrifice from start to finish.

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One of the best evangelistic avenues for churches today is “parental” training. My wife and I watched an episode of the new Marie Kondo show on Netflix. We were introduced to a nice, seemingly happy couple who—it turned out—had absolutely no idea how to run a home. The woman in particular did not know how to do laundry. She evinced real affection for her children, and she wanted to be a homemaker, but she had no clue where to start. Marie Kondo, with her gospel of cleanliness and the largely-amorphous “ideal life,” gave some practical wisdom that made a measurable difference. But as the episode concluded, so many needs remained unmet.

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In watching the show, I could not help but think of how much help even Christian women need today. Feminism has gutted womanhood. I thought this not only when viewing Kondo’s show, but when reading and watching Michael Pollan’s searing (and on-target) critique of our fast-food culture from a few years back. Though Pollan did not connect the dots, the most influential factors behind the decline of home-cooking are the spread of feminism and the dissolution of the family. Women in

many cases have had little or no training in homemaking, childraising, cooking, cleaning, organizing, budget management, and more.

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This is true not only in non-Christian circles but in the church. These vital practices (part of a vocation of womanhood) have been ignored, scoffed at, or quietly laid aside in order to avoid controversy by some Christian churches. Yet there is immediate and obvious blessing received when entering a home managed and run by a godly woman. There is warmth, coziness, cheer, security, and beauty in that place. This serenity is not lightly bought, to be sure. It is hard-won. It takes everything a woman has. But it is demonstrably lovely, and it yields a stark contrast with the modern feminist home, which is all too often frenzied, disordered, cluttered, untended, and unlovely.

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When a woman sees this chaos, she will be told by some today to embrace her circumstances. She will hear about the need to live free of guilt. This is a real gift of God grounded soteriologically in the doctrine of justification. But where we are falling into sin and struggle, we need not a therapeutic pat on the back, but a convicting jolt from the Holy Spirit. We need not only affirmation. We need something much, much stronger: God-centered transformation. On this matter, we need the recovery of biblical manhood and biblical womanhood.

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Returning to biblical manhood and womanhood does not mean signing a document that says we are complementarian with regard to who preaches on Sunday. It means that we embrace God's teaching for men and God's teaching for women in all our lives. It means that we see the sexes as united, yes, but also distinctive, and distinctive in ways that give our Lord much glory. It means, following on this theological commitment, that in our churches we offer clear and practical guidance on how to shape a God-honoring life as a man or a woman. Are churches still willing to

provide such formation? If we do not give it, who will?

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Many churches fear that if they provide such instruction, people will tune out and leave. That may happen, particularly when a church has sold the Christian faith as attractively (Jared Wilson's apt term) as possible. But here's the reality: tons of young men and women *want* such training. They want to learn godliness as a man or woman. They are hungry for it. They have never heard it.

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One of my favorite sights in all of life: a young father playing with his children. In the span of just a few moments, he tackles his son without hurting him, sweeps his dress-wearing daughter up in his arms, calmly adjudicates a dispute between temporarily-warring siblings, turns the steak over on the grill so that his wife can have a needed night off from her scratch-kitchen cooking, puts himself in between the wasp enacting a campaign of terror against the children, kills the wasp after an epic battle, winks at his son, receives the grateful hug of his little girl, tears some weeds out of the ground, takes the steak off the grill while holding a child in one arm, enters the house, and pull his wife—the woman of his dreams, his covenant spouse—in for a stolen kiss.

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What a funny term “stay-at-home” mom is. It makes it sound like such a woman's life is a stationary reality. In truth, here is an approximation of her day: she makes a hearty breakfast, unloads the dishwasher, pays bills, tutors in math, runs errands, teaches the Word of God, brokers a peace settlement between two temporarily-warring siblings, plans a trip, pays more bills, consults with husband on dinner ideas, puts laundry into machines, takes laundry out of machines, folds and distributes laundry, prepares material for a talk on godly womanhood, picks up children from school, makes a fresh snack, prepares a scratch meal for dinner that is healthy and tasty, and through it all somehow manages to be both determined and elegant.

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To see a woman who embraces such a life is a thing to behold. I am reminded of Elisabeth Elliot's description of the kitchen sink as an "altar." Her point was that Godward faith transforms even the most mundane tasks into doxological opportunities. She was right—and her voice is sorely needed today. What is more *coram deo* than a selfless, dedicated, others-centered homemaker and mother? Truly, such a creature is living beauty.

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I asked my children one day while their mother was away for a spell what they would like to say to her (I was texting her). Two of the three Strachan progeny passed along paeans to their mother, assuring her of their love and their heartfelt desire that she return home soon. The third (the youngest) thought for a minute and said straightforwardly: "Please tell Mommy that I burned my finger a little bit and got hit on the leg."

Just the facts, ma'am.

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I recall the story of the Houston mother who, encountering desperate circumstances during the flood that ravaged that city some time ago, used her last bit of strength to raise her child above the water, and perished as rescue workers saved the workers. Could a more poignant emblem of motherhood be found?

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As we train our youth, whether in the home, the school, or the church, we would do well to cultivate in them a sense of irony. Irony grows fertile in a world of shadows and make-believe, a world ruined by a serpent who said one thing and meant another (Genesis 3:1-5). Spotting irony is essentially identifying a counterfeit while non-maliciously yet indulgently chuckling at it. Let me give one example: critiquing the free market while engaging fully in the glad rhythms of the free market. This is essentially a cottage industry today. The way to stay on the right side of sophistry today is to pay lip service to

the contradictions and perils of capitalism (which is Karl Marx's term for the free market) while swimming in materialism like a pig in fresh mud. How ironic and humorous it is to see a creature of the digital hive mind typing emotive reflections about capitalistic predation into a \$2000 laptop while listening to Spotify's coolest playlist before closing said laptop and heading to a \$60 spin class.

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I encountered a humorous illustration of this now-common trend a few years ago. A religious professor published a book decrying capitalistic excesses. Turning to the back cover, I chanced to note the price of this fierce text: \$17.99. Decrying capitalistic excesses, it seems, is not cheap.

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While we're on the subject of "reflections," a word to fellow teachers: let us train students in the writing of *theses*. Too often today I assign a position paper, only to receive a *reflection* paper. Reflection is good. There's a place for it in literary form to be sure. But we have to go beyond reflection, too, don't we? A reflection paper summons predominantly the capacity to give an opinion, albeit a thoughtful one. A position paper should advance a case against other cases; it calls for refined thought, balanced judgment, and the ability to handle objections. A humble suggestion: in our classes as Christian educators, might we train our students to think, read, and write so as to advance a case amidst other alternatives? Might that not, over time, strengthen the church's witness, premised as that witness is upon the ability to reason, to persuade, and by God's grace, to compel entrance to the kingdom through repentance and faith?

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The foregoing presupposes that thinking is good. I believe it is. Evangelical youth—children raised in Baptist homes—need to hear this. God gave them a heart, and a soul, and a mind. They are made to be a thinking creature. Thinking is irreducibly good. We glorify God when we do it. Not for nothing did Aquinas and Calvin

locate the precise nature of the *imago dei* in intellection. I disagree with this view, but respect it nonetheless. (I believe the image is an ontological reality—we *are* the image of God per 1 Corinthians 11:7.)

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Some might wonder whether such formation, intellectual and spiritual and moral, is worth its heavy cost. I think it is. I feel the collective despair over current affairs; I understand the *ennui* and torpor that hits every believer in the face of seemingly insurmountable fallenness and cultural decline. But this is not the time to lay back and rest easy. This is the time to wake up. Though much has fallen into ruin today, Jesus will build his church (Matthew 16:18). He will do so until the end, even the bitter end. We cannot forget this declamatory, defiant, and undefeatable truth. Ours is a faith that is not made—as so many systems and worldviews and movements are—only for high times. Ours is a faith that is made and fitted and ready for low times.

If it feels like our world is on fire, if some of what is good and right turns to ash, let us not fail to claim the promise of Christ for his church. In ashes, weep; but also, in ashes, build. •

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