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The MRI Story

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Letter from the Editor

It is with joy and anticipation that I welcome you to our latest edition of Resonance! This Summer, we will explore together the theme of “Christianity and Culture” through the various lenses of Liturgy, Witness, Scripture, and Tradition. Each of these perspectives provide a unique vantage point from which we can discover new ideas, reflect on past experiences, and dialogue together for the purpose of engaging the world around us.

I especially want to thank our continuing readers for joining us again, and I offer a special note of welcome to our new readers and subscribers! Here at Resonance, we are working hard to curate a timely and relevant resource that bridges theological writing and reflection with the day-to-day realities of the life of discipleship. God calls us all in unique ways to serve in unique places, and our goal at Resonance is to help spark learning, dialogue, reflection, and action within your particular setting and community. Along those lines, please take note of the invitations for both individual and church sponsorship that are located at the end of the journal. As we continue to grow our reader base, additional financial resources will help us to press forward and lead the conversation. And as a special “thank you,” all monthly sponsors receive (among other things) a Learning Guide for small groups that is designed to foster conversation and action around each article published in the journal.

This volume, there is certainly a lot to consider. Jeremy Hunt introduces us to the world of heavy music and reveals how God’s Spirit can be at work within popular culture to forge community and create space for spiritual transformation. John Friberg then turns the philosophical question of “the problem of evil” around into an affirmation of all that is good. As Christianity engages culture, we remember and bear witness to the common grace that is at work for the common good of the world. Jason Caywood then describes a compelling
Cultivating Reflection and Response

framework for biblical interpretation - a redemptive-movement hermeneutic - that provides a way to understand some of the biblical justifications for troubling and tragic historical practices such as slavery. He shows us that how we engage the intersection of the Bible and culture makes a critical difference in our ethics and actions. We then turn to the recent social justice movements in Hong Kong. Ann Gillian Chu provides a first-hand assessment of Hong Kong’s Occupy Central and the Umbrella Movement, offering both a critique and a suggested way forward for Christian engagement towards societal change.

Our central Crux article highlights the tension many Christians feel toward the recent developments in Muslim immigration. Here, Matthew Kaemingk challenges perceptions of both the left and the right, and he provides compelling portraits of a kaleidoscopic Christ as a way to move forward and engage our Muslim neighbors with grace and compassion. Agnes Chiu then helps us to reflect on the current state of the U.S. Supreme Court by explaining the impact of the Conservative Legal Movement and the way that public theology can provide an avenue for thoughtful dialogue and engagement. Next, Mary Sayler takes us on a tour through the many instances of the word “truth” in the Bible. She shows us how Jesus is the ultimate truth, while reminding us of God’s foundational truth for our lives and the impact this can have on the culture around us. In our final articles, David Drum speaks to the corrupting dangers of compartmentalizing our lives, and Dana Mahan provides a lesson into the power of perichoresis as a Trinitarian guiding principle for mutual relationship across cultures.

As we can see, Christianity and culture is a broad theme that allows us to explore a myriad of ways that God is working in and for the world. May our reflections and conversations deepen our understanding and lead us to act upon a more holistic practice of discipleship in our daily lives. Welcome to the conversation!

Sincerely,

Dr. Brant Himes
Managing Editor
Towards a Theology of Heavy Music

The Intro Riffs

In recent years, vibrant theological discussions centering around forms of modern artistic expression have taken shape across the spectrum of the church in America. In as far as pop culture is concerned, these have tended to focus most heavily on movies and TV. These two mediums are the air that we breathe in many ways. Entire generations that grew up in the 70s, 80s, and 90s are children of the screen, large and small. We speak in Anchorman quotes, rattle off our favorite episodes of Lost (and lament the lame ones), and obsess over the revival of modern “classics” like Gilmore Girls and X-Files. Our online discussions are littered with GIFs, memes, and YouTube clips, often times taking on elements of shorthand communication between those who will quickly perceive and understand the references given at the drop of a hat.

Yet the one area that still feels relatively underserved in this arena is pop music. Not just “pop” music as a genre, but the overarching form of art that comprises so much of our waking hours. Music is consumed in multiple manners across our society: actively (attending a concert, setting aside time to focus on a new record, even writing music of our own) and passively (riding in the car, shopping in a store, on an elevator, in a doctor’s office, during school and work, and even writing major papers). There must be a richer way for believers to engage with this art and to develop a theology of music that allows for more mature conversations to happen between the form and the faith.

To that end, I offer up the following thesis as a dipping of the toes into the great ocean that is the world of music (and of belief, for that matter): The cultural practices associated with the production, performance, and consumption of modern heavy music (including, but not limited to, punk, hardcore, metal, and noise rock) function
as a creative, communal site for individuals to explore questions of faith and spirituality that are not always permitted within traditional faith communities.

The Case for Heavy Music

To those not accustomed to the world of heavy music, venturing into this uncharted territory must seem akin to being exiled in a foreign land. If there is a map, it would indubitably be convoluted and intimidating. Heavy music is, by its very nature, a barrier to entry to itself. The listener is forced to learn the ropes quickly, a sink or swim mentality by way of being thrown into the deep end of the musical pool. In a word, these styles are not the most hospitable of hosts. One is either along for the ride or risks getting left behind.

For the believer, heavy music brings even additional baggage, as metal bands sometimes use “satanic” imagery for their artwork (Baphomet, upside down crosses, etc.) and in the names/lyrics of songs. The 70s and 80s were fraught with frenzied warnings about the dangers of back-masking and the risks of hellfire, the occult, and sin itself through listening to heavy music (the video series “Hell’s Bells - The Dangers of Rock ’N’ Roll”). This last example is particularly notable because the 1989 original series spawned a sequel in 2004. To be fair, the creators of “Hell’s Bells” don’t even like blues legend Robert Johnson or rock and roll pianist Fats Domino, so their issues might transcend into simply not liking music in any format.

But even for Christians who didn’t grow up in a climate of full-blown condemnation of music, there seems to be have been a struggle to identify an internal tug-of-war that suggests that “non-Christian” music is somehow inherently dangerous. As Jeff Keuss puts it, “While no one expressly forced me to burn my untransubstantiated record albums by artists such as the Beatles, Rush, Jackson Browne, ABBA, Bob Dylan, and Simon and Garfunkel, I was told on a number of occasions to get rid of them in favor of something that had more direct references to faith…”

How Do We Define Heavy Music?

At this juncture, it will be helpful to lay out some parameters for what exactly constitutes “heavy music.” These are my definitions, informed in large part by years of participating in various communities of heavy music. When I use the term “heavy music,” I have in mind four key genres that are all marked by distorted instruments, loud amps, extreme vocals (either
shouted, screamed, sung at high volumes, or a combination of all three), and propulsive tempos. These genres include heavy metal, punk, noise rock, and hardcore. All four find their roots in rock ’n roll, yet each pushes the boundaries of the genre in fresh and compelling ways. Metal traces its origins to the late 60s and early 70s, primarily finding its roots in bands like Led Zeppelin, The Who, and Black Sabbath. Punk was born in the 70s, in part as a response to and reaction against metal (or more broadly, the elaborate/indulgent rock of the 60s and 70s). Key early touchstones for this genre include bands like the Sex Pistols, The Ramones, and The Clash.

Noise rock and hardcore both surfaced later in the 80s, again as outgrowths of punk and metal. Noise rock tends to be dissonant, aggressive, and almost absurd, while hardcore often feels like a brutal force of nature, with crowd chants, breakdowns, and a heavy, thick sound. Notable noise rock bands include The Jesus Lizard, The Cows, and Barkmarket, with Black Flag, Dead Kennedys, and Minor Threat being seminal hardcore groups. Additionally, each of these four categories has various offshoots that can splinter out into even more specialized genres: stoner rock, doom metal, post-hardcore, doom pop, ambient metal, ska, grunge, garage rock, pop punk, emo, screamo thrash metal, death metal, crust punk, and on and on and on.

Before we delve into the intrinsic value found within this sort of music, it might help to have a shortlist of key, exemplary bands who embody the best of what these genres have to offer. Think of these suggestions as a possible soundtrack for the rest of the paper, an opportunity to listen to what the people in these communities are writing and saying: Stavesacre, Thrice, ISIS, Cave In, Melvins, Helms Alee, Converge, Whores., Showbread, MxPx, SUMAC, Underoath, and The Chariot.

What Does Heavy Music Accomplish?

What exactly makes heavy music so valuable? For those who participate in it, either as creators, participants/listeners, or both, these genres often provide a source of catharsis, an outlet for expressing emotions that are difficult to convey in any other manner. According to Steve Von Till, vocalist and guitarist for doom metal legends Neurosis, “Sometimes it feels like a war for your soul. That you have to do these things for your soul and if you didn’t? Your soul is what would pay.” These forms of expression resonate on a deeply profound level,
as evidenced by the fervent communities that come to life based either around a particular band or label, or in a certain geographical area. The instances of the latter tend to focus on key venues for live shows and/or a grouping of likeminded and like-hearted bands that form their own creative circles.⁷

What about the broader spiritual implications of the ways in which heavy music tends to push the boundaries? If we are to mount a defense of these bands and the potent noise that they’re creating, we have to identify some foundational aspects that make the case for celebrating and participating in the shape of this music. To that end, The Lyre of Orpheus: Popular Music, The Sacred, & The Profane by Dr. Christopher Partridge provides us with some deep insights. Partridge suggests that the traditional divisions between high and low art are, in fact, steeped in age-old class divisions, not actual, quantifiable elements that inherently show that some forms of art are better than others.⁸ In his analysis, the merit of an artistic piece comes (at least in part) from the value created as we interact with it.

This brings to mind the work surrounding affective space and the Magisteria-Ibiza Spectrum⁹ that Clive Marsh and Vaughn S. Roberts introduced in their work, Personal Jesus: How Popular Music Shapes Our Souls. In a nutshell, the concept of affective space centers on what’s actually happening when an individual encounters and interacts with art.¹⁰ It is understood that there are mental and emotional engagements happening in these moments. I believe we can even make the case for affective space to include physical and spiritual facets. Heavy music provides a new way for faith to be embodied and to be experienced.

There are few moments as potent as throwing yourself at another human being, colliding in violence, joy, passion, and frenetic energy. In the thundering bass lines, the pummeling drumming and interweaving guitar riffs, there are moments where I have seen beyond myself, where my place in humanity and the universe becomes crystal clear. I am humbled, emboldened, overcome, and transfixed, as music rises, crests, and crashes, wave after wave hitting me in an almost tangible fashion. I have lived through a few key moments of transcendence in my life…and several of them have taken place at metal and hardcore shows.

Returning to Partridge, he makes the case that, while we can continue to judge the
merits of certain art within the boundaries of its own form, it’s almost impossible (or at least, ill-advised) to try to compare works that traditionally fall along the high/low (or pop) art divides. This is where his understanding of transgression and the boundaries of the sacred are vitally important. He moves the conversation into the spiritual realm by suggesting that heavy music, even if transgressive, serves multiple key purposes, all of which makes it deeply needed for the human experience.

The boundary lines protected by religions and by the cultures they have shaped (and again, I am thinking here particularly of Christianity and Western culture, although the net could be cast far more widely) serve, not only to structure life, but to dichotomize it, to dissect it into binary oppositions: sacred—profane; pollution—cleanliness; good—evil; sanity—madness; high—low; normal—deviant; saved—damned. Such boundary marking leaves few gray areas.

**What Does Heavy Music Make Room For?**

Partridge believes that music has the ability to work on the liminal edge, skirting some of the barriers of logical thought by striking straight at the heart and gut, and thus potentially shaping behavior and belief. To give credit where credit is due, this is an aspect of heavy music that critics are correct to bring up. Music has an inherent power to alter moods, inspire, enrage, entice, and otherwise deeply impact someone’s life. Partridge once again offers a defense of heavy music, by focusing on the positive out-workings of playing and listening to it:

Numerous musicians, in pursuing a path of transgression, some bravely, some recklessly, have felt the full weight of social facts against them. This, we will see, is central to their construction as icons within a youth culture that feels alienated and disenfranchised. In standing against the flow of social facts, they have resisted the alienating, disenfranchising, and othering hegemonies of modernity. For transgressive subcultures, the popular music icon is an Athanasius contra mundum, one who stands against the world and against social forces in the service of what might be perceived as “the sacred” — in this case freedom, autonomy, self-determination.

Through this, I believe that he is touching on a major component for assigning value to these genres: the willingness to be bold and to speak truth to power. There are times, in caring for the poor and the outcast, when it is absolutely necessary to stand against the cultural tides (what he refers to as “social facts”). Extending out from his reflections on high and
low art, Partridge is offering up understandings of “sacred” and “profane” that are at once more fluid in one sense and yet almost more Scripturally-based in another. In layman’s terms, the powers that be (the Church, the State, cultural tastemakers, etc.) aren’t always right and the commoner (women, minorities, the rejects, the misfits, etc.) isn’t always wrong.

There are certain virtues (for lack of a better term) that are always true: compassion, love, mercy, provisions for the day, and so on. Heavy music has the ability to speak directly into these areas due to its very willingness to transgress social norms, to question the social constructs that have been agreed upon by the majority in power. Ken Stephenson surmises that even the structure of modern music (the way the songs are composed) makes room for uncertainty and questioning faith in traditional centers of power. The Chariot make this questioning explicit in their song “Cheek,” both through the song structure and the vocals. Rather than a traditional verse-chorus-verse-chorus-bridge-chorus organization, the track is primarily built on a single, relatively simple guitar riff. In a more conventional composition, it would be an intro guitar line, meant to be heard for a few bars and then the song would move on. Instead, it lasts for nearly 4:30 of the track’s overall running time of 5:49. During this timeframe, the vocals consist of a mix of lead singer Josh Scogin screaming an initial verse, only to be overtaken by Charlie Chaplin’s famous monologue from The General. This excerpt calls world powers to task for dehumanizing humanity, making them slaves and pawns in ongoing power struggles. Once this is delivered, Scogin returns for his final vocal assault, while the music rages and burns, finally letting loose after being confined to the opening guitar riff for so long.

For Further Reading

“More Than Music: Notes on ‘Staying Punk’ in the Church and in Theology” by Michael J. Iafrate in Secular Music & Sacred Theology edited by Tom Beaudoin

Your Neighbor’s Hymnal by Jeff Keuss

Personal Jesus: How Popular Music Shapes Our Souls by Clive Marsh and Vaughn S. Roberts

The Lyre of Orpheus: Popular Music, The Sacred, & The Profane by Christopher Partridge
Michael Iafrate takes this a step further, and in so doing, makes it even more explicitly theological, by connecting this behavior directly back into the very ethos of what makes punk rock, punk rock:

First, “staying punk” as a theologian will require my theological production to be committed rather than neutral or objective... we will align ourselves with the various strands of liberation theology, which have challenged theologians to commit to the struggle for justice as the first step in the work that they do.¹⁶

In so doing, Iafrate argues that we can also pursue an approach to faith and theology that is ultimately more egalitarian and more open. By pushing against the gatekeepers of power in all areas of life, a “punk” theology enables all people to have a voice.¹⁷

Lastly, heavy music, through its embrace of pain, brokenness, hurting and the need for cathartic shared experiences, provides full space for lament. This is something that is glaringly absent within the church itself. Our current songs of praise and worship scarcely acknowledge the deep wounds that many (all?) of us carry on a daily basis. We need outlets for grief, both for our own health and the health of our relationships with others who are suffering.¹⁸ If we put a strong face on and simply sing/perform uplifting songs ad nauseam, we risk alienating those who are truly hurting and thus pushing them away from the Spirit who can heal and bind up those wounds.

The Power of Heavy Music for Community

When I was a freshman at a small college just north of Charlotte, NC, I started working with Young Life, a parachurch organization. My heart was bent towards helping high school students, particularly those who didn’t really fit in to any easy social grouping. This inevitably led me to punks and metalheads, teens who spent their free nights and weekends at venues in Charlotte, dives like the Milestone and Tremont Music Hall. It was through Young Life that I met a scrawny kid named Ron. He and I struck up a friendship and though he never ended up coming to a single YL meeting or camping trip, I still look back fondly at the times we shared together. For me, it was always about building the relationships, regardless of the “outcome.”

Ron was the kid who said that if he ended up coming to a YL meeting that he’d probably rip a page out of the Bible to use to roll a joint. I laughed at that, even though he was likely being serious. I told him that
he’d always be welcome, and in return, he introduced me to the music scene that he loved: punk, hardcore, and heavy rock. We went to a few shows together and these gigs became parts of my first introduction to the world of heavy music. At these shows I found people of all walks of life, unified by a passion and zeal for bands and art that were confrontational but also communal. Reflecting on it now, I wonder if my meeting Ron saved me from ditching my faith in the long run.

In the process of wrestling and seeking answers, I found hope, rest, and peace in the world of heavy music. These genres tend to be open to questions, without judgment or threat of being labelled a heretic. This isn’t to paint them as absolutely perfect communities, but they offered me something that, at the time, I couldn’t find in church: acceptance for who I was in the moment and a solidarity to stand shoulder to shoulder with me as I continued my journey. This was a second conversion. A place where I got saved from empty religion, found Jesus anew, and found my people, my family. My love of this intersection of music and faith even brought me to a message board community where I met the woman who would later become my wife and several friends who I’m still in contact with after over 14 years.

Here’s the striking thing: many of them have similar stories of struggling with faith and discovering a home within the communities that rise up around the bands/scenes in these genres. While each person has their unique experiences, certain common thematic elements can be seen. Heavy music creates the space needed for wrestling with loss, it provides community for those who struggle to find it elsewhere in their lives, and it unifies people from different faith backgrounds (Catholic, Protestant, Agnostic, Atheist, and more).

**The Final Bars**

In summary, there is so much more to be explored in this intersection of heavy music and faith. My personal hope is that a vibrant theology of heavy music can be fully fleshed out and developed in the coming months and years. The work is plentiful and I believe that the church could learn quite a bit from the heavy music communities and the journeys of the people who find their homes within those communities. May the Spirit guide us in these new avenues and grant us the wisdom we need to walk faithfully in both love and lament, joy and anger, chaos and peace.
Endnotes


7  Michael P. Farrell, Collaborative Circles: Friendship Dynamics & Creative Work (Chicago: The


10 Marsh and Roberts. *Personal Jesus*, 16-17.


12 Partridge, *Orpheus*, 64.


18 Thrice - Death From Above, YouTube, accessed April 2, 2018, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2TlDTE1UyM0
A Problem of Goodness

“If you want absolute proof that there is no sky fairy, look no further.”¹ This comment recently caught my eye, posted at the end of an article in the Washington Post about the Muslim Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh. After violence ignited last summer, more than 600,000 of them fled from Myanmar (Burma), where for decades they have been deprived of citizenship rights. It is an excellent piece of photojournalism that depicts their flight from the razed villages they abandoned, and their plight in sprawling temporary encampments across the border, drenched by the monsoon rains. Every day our faith is challenged by harrowing events like this that we see in the world around us, or by trials and tragedies that become part of our own experience.

As an undergraduate at a large secular university quite a few decades ago, I remember venturing with some trepidation into a course I took on the “philosophy of religion.” The focus of the course was to make a rigorous examination of the arguments for and against the existence of God, from a purely rational basis without reference to Scripture or to subjective experience. Among my classmates was a Catholic student headed for the priesthood, whose smile always conveyed a sense of friendly goodwill. There was also one of the campus radicals, who cut a figure like Che Guevara with his beret and wispy beard. Angry indignation showed in his face, and it also laced the indictments he wrote in the university newspaper against the school administration on various issues. The meager numbers in the class were filled out by other, more generic students such as myself, too insecure or self-absorbed to really show our colors, but still looking for validation for our favored positions from the course, or perhaps vainly hoping that it might provide us with some insight from the inside, to elevate us above the fray, like a referee who can declare the winner without having to take the blows himself.
The course was well-taught and covered a wide range of perspectives and considerations. But, as is often typical in philosophical argumentation, I was struck again by how diametrically opposed conclusions can be supported by water-tight proofs, depending only on the assumptions taken as starting points. In the end, it seemed quite scandalous that a question of such fundamental importance and with such heartfelt implications, of whether God exists or not, could finally be left hanging on the shifting opinions, ideas, and inclinations of the individual believer or non-believer, without obliging any sort of compliance in one direction or the other. This is not to say that compelling and forceful arguments were not raised on both sides of the question, but rather to comment on our seemingly total freedom to embrace, or reject, one or the other.

In particular I remember “the problem of evil” as something like the “nuclear option” in the arsenal of arguments against God. How is it possible for the existence of a good, loving, and all-powerful God to be compatible with the undeniable fact of evil, pain and suffering in the world? Whatever evidence is offered for God’s existence, this objection always seemed to be waiting as an unanswerable response, ready to obliterate any platform of faith that might be erected. Where is God, when we see pain and disease destroying a person’s personhood, or senseless violence perpetrated on the innocent? How is it possible that gangsters and tyrants survive to a comfortable old age and die in their own beds, while children are taken before their time, and many infants never see the light of day? That scoundrels occupy positions of power and influence, while honest men and women suffer through no fault of their own? That the poor, weak, and vulnerable are subject to neglect, exploitation, and abuse at the hands of those who should be looking out for them?

The well-being of whole populations is often a matter of indifference to leaders who control their fate, and who are just as happy to use them as pawns in their own machinations. “Civilization” seems to consist of a thin veneer of morality that only renders these outrages more palatable, covering an underlying function that simply directs and regulates them within certain boundaries. Selfishness and naked pride are increasingly taken to be the driving engines beneath our own American system. Indulging and appeasing them, whatever the cost and
regardless of the damage, seems to have taken priority over the need to constrain and contain them.

All of this at the same time, ironically perhaps, that we are “connected” to each other at an unprecedented scale, so that the possibilities for social control and manipulation also appear to be unprecedented. Dishonesty, threats, and blame seem to dominate public discourse; the consensus of acceptable morals that was built over generations is increasingly splintered. The complaint in the Psalms that God stands afar off (Ps. 13, 22, 44, and 77) seems as apropos in the modern digital age as ever, but on a global scale now, as well as a personal one. Dystopian visions of the future no longer seem so far-fetched. While the titans of tech compete in launching the innovations needed to usher in the new age, you wonder where is God? Is he distracted by something on his phone, like the rest of us? Did he get lost on his way to the convention? Hard to say.

The problem goes beyond the human realm: different writers note how, at any given moment, creatures without number are being devoured alive by predators, as part of the natural order. For many critics, God’s only defense is a deafening silence of indifference from the vast reaches of the universe. For them, he is either a quaint anachronism that has outlived its usefulness, or a pernicious idea that needed to be abolished long ago.

It is easy for us, as Christian believers, to feel overwhelmed by the scale of the problem, or to feel outclassed by thinkers, writers, and friends, who wield words and logic more effectively than we are able to. While we hope that God will come through in the end, we too easily adopt the “unanswering silence,” which, they complain, is all they hear from him.

But I don’t think this should be the case. First of all, the problem of evil is preceded by a much bigger question: Why do bugs and stars and people even exist? Why does the universe have galaxies, quarks, and planets, instead of all being made out of something less interesting, like industrial waste, or something more economical, like plastic? Why is there time and space, matter and energy, and cosmic background radiation reverberating with the echoes of the first command “Let there be…”? Why is it that babies can be born, that people have the capacity for love and for hope, for music and beauty? Why do our ideals of goodness and morality persist so immovably,
even while we so persistently violate and undermine them? If the secondary “problem of evil” requires an answer, then doesn’t the primary “problem of goodness” need to be answered, too? At least, that is how God put it to Job.

Secondly, the Bible shows us that God already took responsibility for the sins of the world: The demand for his annihilation was met when Jesus died on the cross.

Unexpectedly, that opens the possibility that he can live with us and in us. And so the contest of good vs. evil comes down to our own lives. We are invited to abandon our cynicism and indifference, to join the struggle and make our lives count, to stand for what God stands for. We might not be able to give an explanation for any particular case of pain, suffering, or wickedness. But evil never was the first reality, and neither will it have the last word: Alpha and omega are occupied by someone else.

His promise of “a new heavens and a new earth” still stands, and we can hasten its coming through acts of love, prayer, and service.

Endnotes

For Further Reading
With God in Solitary Confinement by Richard Wurmbrand
In the Name of Jesus: Reflections of Christian Leadership by Henri J. M. Nouwen
O Lord, our Sovereign, how majestic is your name in all the earth! You have set your glory above the heavens. Out of the mouths of babes and infants you have founded a bulwark because of your foes, to silence the enemy and the avenger. When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars that you have established; what are human beings that you are mindful of them, mortals that you care for them? Yet you have made them a little lower than God, and crowned them with glory and honor. You have given them dominion over the works of your hands; you have put all things under their feet, all sheep and oxen, and also the beasts of the field, the birds of the air, and the fish of the sea, whatever passes along the paths of the seas. O Lord, our Sovereign, how majestic is your name in all the earth!

Psalm 8 NRSV


Interpreting Slavery

The film *Lincoln*, by Steven Speilberg (2012), dramatically and accurately portrayed how the 13th Amendment to the United States Constitution was passed. This became the legal “nail” by which that evil social institution of slavery was formally ended. At that time this was a controversial action among Americans. Yet today (almost) everyone would agree that it was both just and necessary. So then, how could anyone think that slavery was morally acceptable?

The answer is not simple because it involves understanding how people interpreted the world and the Bible and vice versa. From my perspective as a modern person in the U.S.A., to state that slavery was (is) evil is self-evident. However, this moral categorization was not always affirmed nor taken for granted by the people living in Europe or among peoples and countries influenced by Western culture. In fact, in every ethnic group or developed civilization that we know about, the moral assumption that some people should be slaves has been normative.

The references in the Bible to slavery reflect (at least) the fact that it was simply taken for granted that some people would be slaves and some not. For example, in the Torah legislation the practice of slavery itself is not condemned nor is it praised. The specific legislation and case law recognizes that some people will be slaves and gives directives about how they are to be treated within the Israelite community. The bent of the legislation appears to favor the welfare of those enslaved and requires those who are masters to treat slaves fairly and humanely. It appears that what little is said about slaves is designed to put restrictions and limitations so as to improve how slaves were treated by the masters.

The same basic assumption regarding the socially normative place of slavery is carried over in the New Testament. Thus the Apostles Peter and Paul, in giving instructions to believers, simply take slavery for...
granted and admonish slaves to live as such by faith and thus in service to Christ. And then, in turn, they exhort believers who own slaves to remember that they will be held accountable before God for how they treat the slaves in their households.³

The general biblical grid of God as the deliverer and savior formed the basis for the Jewish hatred of being under Roman rule, and for the Messianic hope of God’s future historical intervention on their behalf. This theological grid was carried over into the teaching of the Apostles and the first missionaries to the Gentiles—specifically declaring spiritual freedom and equality in Christ before the living God for all who believe.⁴ The message of the Gospel, without calling directly for abolition of slavery legally, effectively undermined the moral foundations upon which the Roman justification for slavery was built—namely, that people belong in castes within society, should remain in their proper roles, and that some rule by natural right over others.

The nearest to explicit condemnation of the practice of slavery the biblical writers come to is when Paul listed “slave-traders” among the lawless (1 Timothy 1:10).⁵ Also, when writing to Philemon, it appears that Paul was strongly urging the slave owner, Philemon, to legally free Onesimus. Paul’s advocacy for Onesimus and his further appeals, or rather pious coercion, amplifies Paul’s opinion that this ought to happen while he also recognizes that it is best for Philemon to be willing to choose to emancipate his runaway slave.⁶ Elsewhere Paul specifically encourages those who are slaves to take the opportunity to get legal emancipation if they can. This advice is counterbalanced with an admonition to not be fretful if they had to remain slaves but rather to serve God in the life situation they are in now (see 1 Corinthians 7:21-24).

This basic advice appears to have been adopted by the Christians in the earliest centuries. In one of his letters, Bishop Ignatius of Antioch (35-112 CE) wrote the following.

> Do not treat slaves, whether male or female, contemptuously, but neither let them become conceited; instead, let them serve all the more faithfully to the glory of God, that they may obtain from God a better freedom. They should not have a strong desire to be set free at the church’s expense, lest they be found to be slaves of lust.⁷

This caution demonstrates the radical difference between the Christian communities and their pagan neighbors. They not only welcomed male and
female slaves into the churches but even (sometimes) the Christian communities would pay the cost to emancipate some! Whereas the expectation among pagans was for people to not mix nor socialize across social class distinctions, the Christians considered these to be irrelevant so far as participation in God’s Kingdom community was concerned. The practices of the earliest Christian communities and the theology it was based on became a seed for the eventual overthrow of the whole moral rationale for slavery.

The full account of how Christians have grappled with the social practices of slavery is not possible to explore here. However, in general, the practice of human slavery varied depending upon time and place in the intervening years as Christianity became the dominant religion in Europe and the Western part of the world. By the time of the middle 1600s in Europe the slave trade and slavery was widely practiced and once again generally assumed to be a necessary part of maintaining and expanding the world economy of European Christendom.

Like those in England, the people in her colonies with a few exceptions accepted slavery as justifiable and needful. Spain, Portugal, and England were all deeply financially wedded to the slave trade. Also by this time, the primary source for acquiring human slaves by European powers increasingly became Africa. African tribes near the sea coast would kidnap people from tribes further inland and then sell them to the European slave traders.

Ironically, one of the commonly voiced justifications in the 1600s among Europeans for enslaving Africans was to give them an opportunity to be exposed to the Christian Gospel. Yet in practice most slave owners put up obstacles to having their slaves taught by ministers or missionaries about the Christian faith.

The notion that if slaves were baptized, ‘they should, according to the laws of the British nation, and the canons of its church’ be freed was legally vague but widely believed. Repeatedly, would-be missionaries to the slaves [in the colonies] complained that slaveholders refused them permission to catechize their slaves because baptism made it necessary to free them. Thus it seemed that the Christian commission to preach the gospel to all nations ran directly counter to the economic interest of the Christian slave owner. This dilemma was solved by colonial legislation.9

Even when this objection was answered formally through
legislation, which clarified that Christian baptism did not necessitate legal emancipation, there remained among most slave owners strong reservations about allowing the slaves to be instructed in the Christian faith. They feared that if they were to embrace Christianity they would come to consider themselves equal to their white masters—and even act against them in rebellion. “In reply, almost every apologist for the evangelization of the slaves felt obliged to prove that Christianity would actually make better slaves. . . . The missionaries labored to build a stout wall between spiritual and temporal equality . . .”\textsuperscript{10}

There were some slave owners who were genuinely open to having their slaves instructed about Christianity. However, the caveat was always set that any conversion to Christian faith or involvement in a Christian church was to never imply that slavery itself was morally problematic nor that conversion granted them legal emancipation. Within the confines of this understanding of Christianity, many of the negro slaves did in fact become Christians and participated meaningfully in Christian community among themselves and (sometimes) with white colonists and slave owners.\textsuperscript{11}

We look back upon these attitudes and assumptions which the American colonists held about the enslaved Africans with disgust and bewilderment. How could these “Christians” think this? How could they justify human enslavement—especially those who claimed the name Christian? How could they read and interpret the Bible so as to justify these beliefs? The answer is (in part) found by examining the notion of “race” and “races” among humans.

One explanation for why slavery was considered normal and a morally defensible way of life was that the English colonists viewed the African slaves as kind of subhuman. This was rooted in the reigning assumption that humans were biologically divided into “races” and that skin color was the primary indicator of those differences. And further, that the self-perceived identity of the colonists as “white” Englishmen meant that “black” people were considered unequal.

As I have already noted, the buying and owning and selling of human beings had continued, in one form or another, since the emergence of Christianity in the late Roman period. What made the form of slavery that has made American history infamous is the belief that Africans were an inferior and
subhuman “race” and “white” Europeans were a superior “race” among humans. This notion of divisions among or different types of human beings (“races”) was first developed by European intellectuals who were openly hostile to historic orthodox Christianity.

Although the ancients recognized that people in different places often looked different, they interpreted that variation in local, not continental, terms. The idea that each continent contains largely homogeneous masses [races], which are different from the masses [races] on other continents, had to wait until the seventeenth century. By the mid-eighteenth century, the idea that the people of the world could be collapsed into a few para-continental clusters [races] was being taught by the influential Swedish naturalist Carl Linnaeus and the influential German philosopher Immanuel Kant.12

I suggest that this demonstrates that Christian people live in and are effected by the normative assumptions of the country, people, and subculture that we identify with. And this can become the means to interpret reality, learn how to perceive others who are different, and determine what we think God’s will is for ourselves and our neighbors. Christians turned a blind eye to the evil of slavery and interpreted the Bible to fit that social practice because they embraced cultural norms. Specifically in this case, they embraced the predominant concepts regarding human origins and identity which had become justifications for current practices of slavery. Those professing to hold to historically orthodox Christian beliefs positively advocated for retaining the system of slavery.

For example, Frederick A. Ross, a Presbyterian minister, argued that the abolitionists were dependent upon the political principles of independence derived from the current political thought and the founding political documents of America, especially the Declaration of Independence— not the plain the teaching of
the Bible. The abolitionists were the unbelievers who had embraced unbiblical principles and had led many to disregard plain biblical teaching. While he makes several types of theological arguments, they are all based on the assumption that white people have been positioned by God in a superior position socially over negros (and others).\textsuperscript{14}

On the other hand, the opinions among Christians who were generally opposed to slavery varied. Some adamantly opposed slavery as an unequivocally moral evil that must end.\textsuperscript{15} However, most people living in America had little interest in abolishing it through legislation. They held to the same racial views that their Southern countrymen and women did, with the exception that they did not like the practice of slavery.

As interesting and instructive as historical study is, my primary concern is the necessity of grappling with questions of culture and biblical interpretation. This is a pressing question because racist ideology is still retained by some people today and it remains as repugnant to God as it was before! The question is do we know why racism is wrong and why Scripture does not approve of either slavery or racist attitudes?

I propose that we must apply our minds to seriously study not only the specific words of Scripture but learn the overarching teaching of God revealed through it. Let us be wary of simply assuming that because some practice is referenced in Scripture (and not condemned) that God approves of it. What we must do is carefully assess all the relevant passages regarding slavery to see how it was characterized and what the overall trajectory of teaching about it points towards.\textsuperscript{16}

The Southern slaveholders made a compelling argument that they were more faithful to the literal meaning of Scripture. How might this have been answered? I think that the texts of Scripture have within them hints and explicit pointers to indicate that there are multiple layering of reasons for the commands God gave. Some are obviously designed to be unambiguous statements of God’s will for human beings (notably, the Ten Commandments). Others are commands which reference social practices and regulate them.

We as readers and interpreters of Scripture need to ask why the specific commands and legislation regarding slavery were given. Do the boundary lines which such commands set up tend to demonstrate that
the practice is noble and life
giving? Is there any evidence
in the ordinances that God
intended to limit the practice of
slavery?

I would argue that the
legislation in the Torah does
point us towards the conclusion
that God wanted his own
people to release each other
from the burden of slavery
rather than hold another
perpetually in this bondage.
For God himself is the deliverer
and redeemer and he required
his own people to release
fellow Israelites from bondage
in the seventh year. This is a
cue to God’s mind and will for
how he intended for his people
to live together—that they
were to model their personal
lives, family relations, business
dealings, and judicial decisions
upon a model of restorative
justice.

This model is rooted in the very
character of God himself and
his actions towards Israel. I
would suggest that we should
take this and develop a way
of analyzing the biblical text
(hermeneutic) rooted in the
testimony of the biblical text.
To do that means that we
must adopt a “redemptive-
movement hermeneutic.”

A redemptive-movement
hermeneutic is committed to the
rigorous and methodical pursuit
of assessing what elements
within Scripture fall into the
one category [culturally bound]
or the other [transcultural]. . .
. [So as to avoid making] that
which is truly transcultural in
Scripture into something cultural;
nor . . . grant that which is truly
cultural a transcultural status.
Good application of the ancient
text demands that the Christian
community wrestle with this kind
of assessment.17

The abolitionists were right
to appeal to humans being
created in God’s image, having
inalienable rights, and that
those in power must cease this
injustice. They appealed to
transcultural values derived
ultimately from Scripture. But
they did not press arguments
from Scripture, based on a
careful analysis of it, which
clarified which commands were
intended for regulating the life
of the ancient Israelites and
which were principles that God
intended as transcultural in
application. Had they done that
they could have taken away
from the Southern slaveholders
their strongest source of
authority—the supposed
blessing of the Bible for the
institution of slavery.

This task of sorting out within
Scripture what commands
and ordinances are intended
for application to ancient
context (as historical-culturally
bound) and which apply
transculturally is difficult but
necessary. We must grapple
with these categories when
interpreting texts in Paul and Peter’s letters. Do Paul and Peter actually approve of slavery as morally justified? Or are they simply exhorting believers who are slaves to serve God as slaves? We as modern readers of Scripture would surly give a “No” and “Yes” answer. I think that is correct but we need to know why those answers are correct!

The way forward in this necessary interpretative task is to closely examine the overall trajectory of what Scripture states about slaves and slave owners. What is the purpose of the ordinances? How do they compare with the assumptions of the ancient cultures around Israel? Is there wording that explicitly or implicitly points toward transcultural application? How does the relationship between slave and slave owner compare with the revelation of God’s character and actions? How does it line up with the Lord’s teachings?

I have long thought that the demons must take great delight when people misuse God’s word to justify their own sin—and especially their bigotry and hatred for other people. William Gurnall’s insightful comment stands as a warning to us all.

No sin is small, but the least sin amounts to blasphemy when you commit it on a pretense of Scripture. The devil cannot think of anything he had rather glory in than to wound God’s name with His own sword [the word of God]. He [the devil] coaxes man to sin and then brags that God made him do it. If God ever singles out a man on the face of the earth for His utmost wrath, it will surely be the person who shelters his sin under the wing of holy Scripture. 18

May we learn from the errors of those who went before us. May God grant to his people in this generation the willingness to discern the truth as we stand under the Scripture’s authority and always ask for the Holy Spirit’s guidance. For we have been given the responsibility

For Further Reading

Slave Religion: The “Invisible Institution” in the Antebellum South by Albert J. Raboteau

Is Science Racist? by Jonathan Marks

Slaves, Women & Homosexuals: Exploring the Hermeneutics of Cultural Analysis by William J. Webb

New Issues Facing Christians Today by John Stott
to search the Scriptures and obey the Lord’s commands so that we can come to unity in the truth and work lovingly towards doing justice for all people.

**Endnotes**

1 Thus slaves are the property of the slave owners (Exodus 12:44; 21:20-21; Leviticus 22:11); slaves who were non-Hebrew did not have be released at the end of six years (Leviticus 25:44-46); sexual relations with female slaves by owners did not carry the same penalties as such sexual encounters with free women who are betrothed (Deuteronomy 22:25-27; Leviticus 19:20-22); they could be punished through physical beatings (Exodus 21:20-21).

2 For example, they were to be afforded the ability to fully participate in the Festivals with everyone else (Exodus 12:44; Leviticus 22:11; Deuteronomy 12:12, 18); Hebrew slaves were to be released after six years (Leviticus 25:39-43); they were to receive provisions from masters upon release (Deuteronomy 15:12-18); physical beatings of slaves were restricted (Exodus 21:20-21); slaves who were injured by their masters then were freed from legal bondage (Exodus 21:26-27); and remarkably runaway slaves were not to be forcibly returned to their masters (Deuteronomy 23:15-16).

3 See 1 Corinthians 7:21-24; Ephesians 6:5-9; Colossians 3:22-4:1; 1 Peter 2:18-23.


5 The Torah also condemned kidnapping in order to enslave people (see Exodus 21:16; Deuteronomy 24:7).

6 This interpretation has been disputed by some
commentators, but I think that Paul’s adept appeal and strong arming tactics with his friend clearly point toward legal emancipation of Onesimus (see in particular verses 15-21).


8 Also, it should be noted that in areas dominated by Islam slavery was fully accepted as normal and needful. So the views of European Christians more or less matched up with the other world powers at the time.


10 Slave Religion, p.103.

11 For a thorough and readable description of the general perspectives and practices of the American Colonists, specifically regarding religion and the relative status of negro slaves within their society, see Raboteau, Slave Religion, pp.96-210.


13 I suspect that the combination of Europe having inherited the long history and cultural of the Romans informed this bias toward seeing people in other parts of the world as uncivilized or “savages”. Combined with the new “scientific” assessments about the progressive development of animal and human life on earth this presumption of superiority was strengthened.

Also, it should be noted that this supposedly inherent superiority of “white” Europeans to Africans was extended to Asians and American Indian tribes.

14 This incident comes from the official documents of a meeting of the Presbyterian Church in 1857, which sealed a split between the churches in the Northern and the Southern portions of America over slavery. At issue was whether a slave owner should be ordained as a missionary. See A Documentary History of Religion in America to the Civil War, 2nd Edition, edited Edwin S. Gaustad, (Eerdmans:1993), pp.500-502.

15 Among them were the Puritans and Quakers, some Baptists, Congregationalists, Presbyterians, Lutherans and Methodists.

16 See William J. Webb, Slaves, Women & Homosexuals. This general point would apply to many different issues over which Christians have historically been divided. For example, warfare, serving in the military, slavery, appropriate submission to government and forms of church government. In more modern times, Christians have divided over involvement in democratic forms of government, social engagement, divorce, ordination of women in churches and homosexuality.


A Perspective of Christianity on Civil Disobedience

A Study of Hong Kong’s Occupy Central and the Umbrella Movement

What started as a small scale Occupy Central movement on March 27, 2013 later morphed into the large scale Umbrella Movement that lasted from September 28, 2014 to December 15, 2014, paralyzing Hong Kong for over two months. The key leaders of Occupy Central and the Umbrella Movement are Christians who are reflective individuals, in accordance with their vocations: a minister, a lawyer, a professor, and students. As a Hong Kong Christian, I had not had any theological reflections on sociopolitical issues prior to Occupy Central and the Umbrella Movement. However, these movements sparked my thinking about how Christian ethics should inform our view of civil disobedience. These events elicited different responses from different parts of the Hong Kong Christian community, causing huge conflicts within and between churches: while progressive parachurch organizations in Hong Kong have consistently engaged with sociopolitical issues, the majority of Hong Kong Christians are congregants from conservative Evangelical and Charismatic churches who have not been educated to look at sociopolitical issues through a Christian lens.

Based on my reflections on these recent movements in Hong Kong, I would like to argue that Christian churches should educate their congregants on sociopolitical issues, so that both the church and individual congregants can speak to the world prophetically, as a part of Jesus’ teaching in caring for the weak. Civil disobedience should not be the main means for the church to express social concerns. Rather, a godly life that witnesses Jesus as Lord should be how...
Christians exert their power to effect changes in society. This witness cannot be short-term, like civil disobedience is so often; it must be sustained and life-long.

Prior to the movements, Hong Kong churches, especially Evangelical and Charismatic ones, displayed an innate suspicion of social involvement, because social involvement is seen as straying from preaching the Gospel. For these churches, Christianity is only concerned with spiritual and individual morality, rather than larger sociopolitical structures and systems. Evangelism, in turn, becomes the only means of acceptable worldly engagement. The dichotomization of spirituality from the secular world is why most laypeople have not been taught to think about sociopolitical issues from a Christian perspective. However, the New Testament is full of spiritual and political teachings. The church should educate congregants to interpret their highly politicized contemporary world through a Christian lens, because all human work has value and eternal significance, even when it seems secular.

Why is the influence of Christian ideals upon the formation of lay socio-political views so important? In order for the church to effectively implement God’s Word so that it acts as a check and balance to the authorities, the church needs to be able to engage the government in dialogue. Standing outside shouting critique is generally regarded as a nuisance—to work effectively within the system, the church needs individual laypeople within the government and the business world who hold strong Christian convictions on sociopolitical issues and who are willing to advocate for Christian ethics. Their social standing and official roles within the government and the business world will afford them opportunities to speak in a way that the Chinese government will respect. However, it is important to note that attempts to work within the system do not mean that we, as Christians, necessarily endorse or go against the system.

Our focus as Christians should always be on the Lord, and there are many people who try to do what is theologically appropriate within the constraints of their position as a life-long witness to Christ as Lord before the world. People such as William Wilberforce and the Earl of Shaftesbury demonstrate the effectiveness of social reformers. They used political means to achieve social justice by empowering the poor, promoting social criticism, and striving towards a more democratic government.
Despite the difficulties and ambiguities of the realities of the public sphere, they were able to work constructively and conscientiously for the government and for social benefit while preserving their integrity. Their work in their times proves that civil disobedience is not necessary when Christian ideals can be channeled within the system, working to promote social justice in a way that can be understood by governmental authorities.

I would be hesitant to argue for civil disobedience as an ideal means for the church to speak into the world prophetically. Yet there are other arguments that propose civil disobedience as a necessity, especially in the context of Hong Kong, and it would not do them justice if I did not at least mention them. It could be argued that that since policies are, in effect, decided by a Chinese government that does not listen to the people when the issues are presented in a subtler manner, now is the time for more drastic measures. Accordingly, the Occupy Central movement has claimed that they responded with civil disobedience as a last resort, when grievance procedures were exhausted. It is true that, since the handover in 1997, people in Hong Kong have held massive demonstrations, de facto referendums, and hunger strikes; yet there seems to be little effect in achieving universal suffrage. In fact, freedom of speech seems even more limited. However, who can be the judge that all means have been sought? What we can see explicitly is all the efforts that have been undertaken outside the system to undermine the system, which is why the Chinese government is so strongly against it. However, if we attempt to work within the system, even though it is a slow and less visible process, the effect may be greater than we can imagine.

It can be difficult to justify civil disobedience as necessary. Yet, we Christians refer to the Bible, which teaches us that civil disobedience is only justified when the authority forces believers to disobey the law of God. For example, in the early church, the Roman Empire was a pagan empire. Therefore, the concept of a secular state did not exist. Under such rule, the followers of Jesus in the New Testament risked their lives by not following the pagan imperial power. This demonstrates that civil disobedience is viable when religious freedom is under threat, but it is an option that should not be taken lightly and requires communal consultation and consensus. However, under most other circumstances, Christians’ primary responsibilities are
evangelism and godly living, through which we witness to Christ before the world, in hopes of changing others and affecting society.\textsuperscript{15}

It is difficult to argue that religious freedom for Christians in Hong Kong is under threat, or that Christians are being forced to disobey the law of God: under Basic Law, the Hong Kong people still have freedom of religion, unless it openly contravenes the law of the region. In practice, this means that the Chinese government is concerned with treason, secession, sedition, and subversion against the Chinese government.\textsuperscript{16} It is unlikely for any government, even ones in the Western world that characterize themselves as democratic and civilized, to freely accept religions that promote treason, so this clause is not a radical thought. Moreover, the goals of the Umbrella Movement and the Occupy Central movement are the revocation of moral and national education and for universal suffrage to be implemented. How do either directly relate to disobeying the law of God? Sociopolitical concerns are part of Jesus’ teachings, especially on caring for those without a voice and in speaking prophetically to the fallen world. However, when Christians address such matters, it is not necessarily through measures such as civil disobedience.\textsuperscript{17}

The use of civil disobedience in Hong Kong’s situation is unjustified from the Christian

\textbf{For Further Reading}

- \textit{Common Objects of Love: Moral Reflection and the Shaping of Community} by Oliver O’Donovan
- \textit{The Just War Revisited} by Oliver O’Donovan
- \textit{Bonds of Imperfection: Christian Politics, Past and Present} by Oliver O’Donovan and Joan Lockwood O’Donovan
- \textit{Jesus through the Centuries: His Place in the History of Culture} by Jaroslav Pelikan
- \textit{The Church in Politics} by Andres S. K. Tang
- \textit{Theological Reflections on the Hong Kong Umbrella Movement} edited by Justin K. H. Tse and Jonathan Y. Tan
- \textit{The Mission of God’s People: a Biblical Theology of the Church’s Mission} by Christopher J. H. Wright
perspective, as it was not brought about because of lack of freedom of religion. The protesters state that civil disobedience is justifiable if done conscientiously, without inflicting harm on others.\(^{18}\) The protesters might claim that they are simply fasting or participating in an illegal sit-in protest, which in their view is a non-violent means of protest. Yet who is to say self-inflicted pain is not a form of violence?\(^{19}\) Not only does it cause harm to the demonstrators, it also hurts those who care for them. Who is to say disrupting the livelihoods of those working and living in the “occupied areas” is not a form of violence? The movement caused financial loss, not only to multinational corporations, but especially to day laborers who worked near the protest areas. The protest made it difficult if not impossible for the day laborers to get to work, leaving them without wages. Striving for freedom alone is not enough; demonstrators need to care for the effects on people’s daily lives as well. Good motives do not excuse actions of self-injury or actions that deprive others financially. Furthermore, the negative impacts of the movement present a negative witness of Christ to society.\(^{20}\)

On a micro level, Occupy Central caused conflict in interpersonal relationships, despite the stated aims of
achieving political goals through dialogue and consensus, and building a channel for communication for those with different beliefs. Contrary to these aims, the movements drove people of different views farther away from each other, rather than promoting dialogue. Presently, nobody trusts that those with different views have the best interests of Hong Kong at heart. Congregants within the same church with different views are unable to listen to each other. More devastatingly, Christian leaders on both sides of the argument have made high profile proclamations and accusations, exposing the rift in Christ’s church to the world. Certainly, this cannot be the best way for Christians to witness to Christ. When causing such conflict in all walks of life, is civil disobedience really the best way for Christians to speak into the world, as opposed to developing influential laypersons to act as the church’s advocates with the government?

Christians live in tension between the demands of the world in which they live and the demands of Christian discipleship. In a world that is already but not yet, when facing sociopolitical issues, Christians need to trust that their advocacy within the government resembles the slow work of God, and that some extent of good achieved within the existing structure is in itself a form of good. This form of advocacy will not only change society; it will also allow the church to act as a witness for Christ to the world in ways that civil disobedience cannot. Moral integrity is essential to Christian distinctiveness, and in turn, witnesses to Christianity in the public sphere. In the short run, it might seem more effective for Christians to participate in a one-off large-scale demonstration than to witness to the world by being good citizens and workers, yet only lasting for two months and without any follow up action, the lack of perseverance in the Umbrella Movement will be questioned by the watchful eyes of the secular world. This is why Christian churches can and should achieve social justice through a life-long witness to Jesus as Lord, educating their congregants about social concerns in order to raise up advocates for the church in the existing structure, rather than engaging in disruptive short-term acts such as civil disobedience.

Who will be the Moses of Israelites and courtier of Pharaoh for Hong Kong? It will truly be a liberating sight when the congregants of Hong Kong churches can proclaim peacefully and collectively: “Here am I; send me!”
Endnotes

1  Occupy Central Movement is short for Occupy Central with Love and Peace, a campaign for universal suffrage in Hong Kong through the civil disobedience act of occupying Central, the central business district of Hong Kong. The movement came about because the campaigners believe that a truly harmonious society can only be built upon a just political system. From Occupy Central with Love and Peace Movement, “Manifesto,” accessed February 26, 2017, available from http://oclp.hk/index.php?route=occupy/book_detail&book_id=11#sthash.65R380YM.dpuf.

2  Umbrella Movement, also known as the Umbrella Revolution, was independently organized illegal demonstrations in several major districts in Hong Kong. The aim of this civil disobedience act is to strive for universal suffrage in Hong Kong. The name contains “umbrella” because the protestors, mainly students, used umbrellas to defend themselves when the Hong Kong police used pepper spray and tear gas to disperse the crowd. From Daniel R. Russel, “Evaluating the Impact of the ‘Umbrella Movement,’” accessed June 20, 2017, available from https://www.humanrights.gov/dyn/2014/12/evaluating-the-impact-of-the-umbrella-movement/.


10 William Wilberforce was a member of the British parliament in the nineteenth century and a personal friend of William Pitt, the prime minister of the United Kingdom at the time. Due to his Christian convictions, he worked tirelessly within the governmental system to abolish slave trade in Britain and British colonies. From Justo L. Gonzalez, The Story of Christianity: the Reformation to the Present Day, (New York, NY:
Earl of Shaftesbury Anthony Ashley Cooper was a member of the British parliament in the nineteenth century. Due to his Christian convictions, he worked tirelessly within the governmental system to enact laws that provided better environment and more rights for those who were marginalized and oppressed.


ibid.

Wright, 222-243.


Occupy Central with Love and Peace Movement, “Manifesto.”

Following Jesus and Stereotyping Islam

The evidence is overwhelming: Muslim immigrants in the West do not define themselves, Westerners do that for them. Throughout Western media and popular discourse Muslims immigrants are constantly being discussed, described, caricatured, and categorized. Denied the ability to speak for themselves, Muslims are spoken for. They exist for description, not dialogue.

As a Christian ethicist I am interested in a simple question: what is an authentically Christian response to this destructive and dehumanizing behavior?

Flat Muslims:

The Stereotypes of the Right and the Left

Western stereotypes of Muslims can be found on both the political right and the left. Both sides caricature their Muslim neighbors by placing them in simplistic frameworks to describe, explain, and ultimately solve the Muslim “problem.”

To be brief, those on the political right tend to frame their Muslim neighbors with threat-oriented categories and stereotypes. Muslims are framed as a threat to national security, law, order, peace, and culture.

Those on the left occasionally create their own threat-based frames for Muslims. The European left, for example, has historically portrayed Muslim immigrants as a threat to the rights of women, gays, lesbians, the arts, and free speech.

However, more often than not, the political left avoids threat-based frames and opts for need-based frames. Here Muslims immigrants are framed by a set of perceived needs. Needs, mind you, that can only be met by the West.

According to the need-based framework of the left,
Muslim immigrants are defined and described as a group of people hampered by a wide variety of cultural, educational, religious, and political deficits—deficits that the left would like to eagerly fill. For example, Muslim immigrants are framed as ignorant and uneducated—therefore in need of Western education. They are also framed as medieval or pre-modern—therefore in need of Western modernization. They are framed as economically weak and helpless—therefore in need of economic empowerment. They are framed as religiously backward and malformed—therefore in need of a “reformation.”

While seemingly generous, when the left gets to define your hunger, it gets to decide your diet as well. From the left’s heightened position, it is empowered to not only diagnose the Muslim sickness, but to also prescribe the Western cure.

Whether the stereotypes come from the right or the left, three things hold true regardless. First, Muslims are not permitted to define or describe themselves, that will be done for them. Second, Muslims are often defined using simplistic and manageable frameworks. Complex Muslim individuals must be transformed and distilled into something simple—something the West can both understand and “fix.” Third, Muslims will consistently be framed as passive recipients while Westerners will be framed as active agents. It is the Muslim’s calling to be a problem. It is the Westerner’s calling to be a solution.

I should be clear, there is no moral equivalence here, the political right is clearly more aggressive and malevolent towards Islam than the left. However, neither side consistently allows Muslims to speak for themselves. Neither side allows for “Islam” to be what it is, namely, an extremely complex, diverse, and global public religion of deep brokenness and beauty, vice and virtue.

Instead of contending with the vast complexity of Islam, Muslims are boxed in, simplified, and worked on. They are a project to complete, a question to answer, a sickness to cure.

**A Christ-Centered Response**

What has been the response of Western Christians to these stereotyping efforts? For the most part they have obediently accepted the myopic frameworks of the political right and left. Western Christians have shown little interest in contending with the vast complexity of Islam.
Instead, they have found the simplistic frameworks of the left and the right to be both clear and comforting. The simplicity of threat and need-based stereotypes are more desirable than the complexity of real living-and-breathing Muslim neighbors.

While this development is discouraging, even more disheartening is this: *The person, work, and teaching of Jesus Christ plays almost no discernable role in how Western Christians are publicly framing or responding to their Muslim neighbors.*

As a Christian ethicist, I believe that Christian ethics should have at least something to do with, you know, Jesus Christ. In light of this conviction and out of a desire to correct this oversight, the remainder of this article will explore the following question:

*What if Jesus Christ was the interpretive framework through which Christians viewed their Muslim neighbors?*

With this question in mind, the remainder of this article explores how a wrestling with the complex life and work of Jesus Christ can help Christian citizens enter into a more complex engagement with their Muslim neighbors than is currently on offer from either the right or the left.

**A Complex Christ for a Complex Neighbor**

When surveying the conflict over Muslim immigration in the West, thoughtful observers are immediately struck by its complexity. The debate involves terrorism and security, workplace and family law, clothing and food, race and gender, language and class, artistic and intellectual expression, and so much more. With each passing year the complexity of the debates and questions only seem to proliferate.

Approaching a complex issue like this with a simplistic and flat understanding of Jesus will not do. Fortunately, the Jesus of Scripture is a multifaceted, dynamic, and varied figure. He is a healer and a friend, a prophet and a priest, a liberator and a mystic, a servant and a king.

The various Christological images explored below come from four theologians who are particularly passionate about exploring the complex work of Christ and its implications for public life. All four theologians were influenced by the early Reformation leader John Calvin. Calvin himself formulated a wide variety of complex images of Christ. One commentator notes that Calvin regularly cobbled together a kaleidoscopic
Christological mosaic from stones not necessarily cut to fit. He wants to depict Christ as fountain, brother, criminal, and king as Christ exhibited these realities in the varied details of his life. This eclecticism is essential to Calvin’s thinking, for it represents simply the fullness of Christ’s history. To commit oneself to [Calvin’s kaleidoscopic Christ] is to commit oneself to a broad, diverse, detailed reality that threatens at all times to exceed one’s grasp.²

The complexity of Christ always exceeds the Christian’s grasp. And this will be our primary point: an honest wrestling with a complex Christ demands an honest wrestling with a complex Muslim and the complex call to love them.

Simplistic understandings of Christ breed simplistic understandings of Muslims. Complex Christologies help us push for a nuanced openness to the mystery, complexity, and dynamism of that thing we call “Islam.”

The following vignettes provide hints as to how the complex Lordship of Jesus Christ breaks open our myopic visions to the pluriformity, dignity, and rights of our Muslim neighbors. Each of these brief vignettes receive a more robust exploration in my book, Christian Hospitality and Muslim Immigration in an Age of Fear.

**Christ the King:**
**Abraham Kuyper**

A great deal of the conflict over Islam’s presence in the West is really all about power—who’s in control. When a nation is divided between different religious and ideological groups, who gets to decide? As we noted, many Westerners frame Muslims as coming to “take power.” When Muslim immigrants are framed as threats to power, the solution that follows is quite simple. Exclude Muslims from power and ensure that they cannot get anywhere near it. Framed as a power struggle, it is not long before Muslim centers of power and social spaces (e.g. mosques, Muslim schools, organizations, business, charities, families, etc.) become suspicious gatherings that need to be monitored, controlled, and suppressed.

Abraham Kuyper’s Christ-centered approach to power offers a way beyond this simplistic and destructive framing of Islam and Muslim spaces. Abraham Kuyper was a Christian prime minister who rose to political prominence in the 1890s in the Netherlands. This was a period when the Dutch people were evenly divided between four rival ideologies: Calvinism, Liberalism, Catholicism, and Socialism. With four very different ideologies each
competing for political power, these four communities had to find a way to live together.

It was within this context that Kuyper developed a Christ-centered case for the just and generous distribution of political power and space across religions and ideologies. In short, Kuyper argued that Christ alone was in sovereign control over the nations and its diverse social spaces. Christ alone, not the government, would judge the various public religions and ideologies at work in the Netherlands. Therefore, Catholic schools, Socialist labor unions, Liberal newspapers, and Calvinist churches all deserved their Christ-given freedom to live out their ideals in community. Christ alone was in control of the nation—not Christians.

Applied to our current context, if God is truly sovereign over Muslim mosques, schools, marriages, organizations, and fashion choices, that means Christians and Christian churches are not. Within this Christological framework our Muslim neighbors can now be “reframed” as subjects of Christ’s rule rather than Christian rule. At the end of time Christ alone will judge Muslim spaces and communities. Christ has empowered Muslims to be parents, students, artists, business leaders, and politicians. Christ has not empowered Christians to do these tasks for them. Christians must honor Christ’s empowerment of Muslim citizens. Christians must let go of their lust for power and control. Furthermore, according to Kuyper’s Christology, when Christians actively defend the rights and freedoms of Muslim individuals and institutions, they are positively honoring the sovereign reign of God.

**Christ the Healer:**

*Klaas Schilder*

Clubs and torches, swords and shouting, fear and anger, attack and reprisal. This is an apt description of the scene on the Mount of Olives on the night that Christ was betrayed. This also serves as an apt description of the current political climate and debate over Muslim immigration. Lots of heat, little light. Fraught with a sense of political fear and fragmentation, our debates over issues of religious diversity and immigration often leave us feeling isolated, wounded, and more frustrated than when they began.

Amidst the midnight struggle between the disciples, soldiers, and servants of the High Priest, a slave named Malchus is injured by Peter’s sword. His ear falls to the ground. How does Jesus respond amidst the cacophony? He rebukes Peter’s
violence, he reaches out an unarmed hand and heals the ear of the slave who came to arrest him.

The theologian Klass Schilder remarks that in this act Christ demonstrates the true nature of divine kingship as both healing and liberating. In his final miracle, Christ the king liberates the slave who came to bind him. He heals the one who came to injure. He gives life to the one who came to kill. Here, Schilder argues, true kingship, true power, is on display.

It is not uncommon today for Islam to be framed as a religion of conquest. Muslims, it is said, are coming to attack, bind, and “take over” the West. Likewise, Westerners are framed as cultural defenders responsible for erecting walls around Western civilization and preempting attacks against their would be aggressors.

This story of Malchus offers an interesting rebuke to this framing of conquest and fear. Malchus is clearly coming to attack and bind Jesus. His orders are to take Christ’s freedom away and lead him to his death.

How does Jesus respond to this aggression? Jesus reaches out his unarmed hand to heal the one who came to injure, to liberate the one who came to bind.

Many Christians would rightly argue that national security in a violent world sometimes requires a coercive defense. However, the story of Malchus stands nonetheless. Christ’s healing and liberation of the slave reminds us that “security” is not the ultimate goal of Christ’s politics. His ultimate end is healing, liberation, and restoration.

Rather than frame our Muslim neighbors as a security threat to be neutralized, the tale of Malchus offers an alternative Christological frame for our Muslim neighbors. Muslim immigrants need not be framed as a challenge to be overcome but as a profound opportunity for the followers of Jesus to humbly and vulnerably reach out an unarmed hand to connect, to engage, and to heal. Christ’s historical healing of Malchus reframes our historical moment, not as a challenge to the gospel, but its great opportunity.

**Christ the Naked: Klaas Schilder**

It is common today to frame Islam as uniquely violent and the West as uniquely peaceful. Citizens in the West robe themselves with the labels of rationality, tolerance, and freedom while they robe their Muslim neighbors with the labels of irrationality, hate, and oppression. Robed in all that is
right and good, the West is free to strip Islam bare and expose the naked truth about Islam.

Klaas Schilder wrote a powerful and raw theological meditation on the nakedness of Christ on the cross entitled “Christ Disrobed.” In this reflection, Schilder explores a rather unwelcome question: What is the significance of the Christ’s disrobing on the cross? What does it mean that the sovereign God of the universe allowed himself to be stripped naked?

While the reader ponders the nakedness of Christ, Schilder argues that in fact humanity is “really the one who was disrobed on Golgotha.” For, as we “look carefully upon His naked death, upon His essential nakedness,” we see that in our stripping of Christ, our own aggression and violence is being stripped bare. Christ’s naked body exposes our own true selves. We see on the cross that it is “We” who “have robbed God,” and in the naked exhibition of God, all “souls are being discovered.”

Schilder argues that the stripping of Jesus lays bare humanity’s false pretensions of morality, tolerance, and reason. Christ’s nakedness exposes our acts of benevolence as a thin and tattered cloth feebly covering our deeper desires for domination and oppression.

In the shadow of Christ’s nakedness, I am forced to look at my naked aggression and finally admit “to those who ask about it: I am the soldier who removed His clothes.”

Moreover, Schilder declares, having allowed this disrobing, Christ has now “taken all my clothes from me, and has put me, naked and cold, on display before the universe.” For in his disrobing we are exposed.

Here on the cross, our Western pretensions of love, tolerance, and peace are laid bare. We are forced to look upon ourselves for who we truly are. Engaging our Muslim neighbors, followers of Christ the naked carry a deep recognition of our own naked aggression and selfishness. We know that there is no potential for violence in Muslims which is not also present in ourselves. We know that, while we might clothe ourselves with the veneer of Western tolerance and multiculturalism, all citizens, ourselves included, are capable of the violence exposed at Golgotha.

**Christ the Hospitable:**

**Hans Boersma**

[God] stretched out His hands on the Cross, that He might embrace the ends of the world; for this Golgotha is the very center of the earth.

—Cyril of Jerusalem
How might a Christ-centered understanding of hospitality reframe a Christian’s response to Muslim immigration? Hans Boersma is a contemporary theologian whose recent work explores the theme of hospitality in the atoning work of Christ on the cross.

Atonement studies are historically concerned with two primary questions. First, what work has the cross accomplished? And second, what is the significance of the cross for the Christian life? Responses to these questions have historically fallen into one of three lines of argument. The first line argues that the cross functions as a moral example or model of the sort of non-violent and sacrificial life a follower of Jesus should lead. The second line argues that the cross was the moment in which the moral debts of humanity were paid. The final line insists that the cross was the site of Christ’s victory over the spiritual and political powers of this world. This diversity of interpretation is no accident. It reflects the diversity of metaphors, images, and messages attributed to the cross in the Scriptures themselves.

Hans Boersma’s theological contribution to this debate is the unifying theme of hospitality. In the end, Boersma concludes that the cross must be understood, first and foremost, as an act of divine hospitality. For Boersma regards “hospitality as the soil in which the various models of the atonement can take root and flourish.” He argues that at its very core the cross represents an opening up of God’s very self to a world that has closed itself off from the divine embrace. The cross, in other words, makes space in a world that regards itself as full.

Boersma sees cruciform hospitality, not only as the essential calling of Christ, but as the essential calling of the Christian, as well. For him, “Christ’s death and resurrection constitute the ultimate expression of God’s hospitality and form the matrix for an understanding of all God’s actions and as such the

For Further Reading

Christian Hospitality and Muslim Immigration in An Age of Fear by Matthew Kaemingk

Uncommon Decency: Christian Civility in an Uncivil World by Richard Mouw

Theology, Political Theory, and Pluralism by Kristen Deede Johnson
normative paradigm for human actions.” Moreover, Boersma concludes that disciples of the hospitable One must embody his hospitality not only in their ecclesial—but in their public lives as well.

Christ made space for humanity on the cross, and the proper human response to that hospitality is to make it one’s own. One’s personal experience of divine hospitality must overflow into the social, economic, cultural, and even political lives of our Muslim neighbors. Because Christ opened his nail-pierced hands to friend and foe alike, his disciples must reflect that posture in all of their interactions with Islam. Put simply, Christians make space for Muslims, because Christ first made space for them.

Framed by the hospitable cross, our Muslim neighbors are no longer unwanted intruders but honored guests. If we fail to make space for Muslims, we deny the cross that made space to us.

**Christ the Complex King**

Christians prefer to “professionalize” their connection with Islam. By this I mean, we like to pay professional missionaries, pastors, activists, scholars, and non-profit leaders to professionally engage with our Muslim neighbors—so we don’t have to. In this my fellow Christians and I mimic the politics of both the left and right. The political right hires soldiers, police officers, and immigration officials to deal with Muslims. Likewise, the political left hires social workers, teachers, and counselors to deal with Muslims. We all farm it out. Right, left, and Christian we want to delegate our engagement with Muslims to hired professionals—once again, so we don’t have to.

Herman Bavinck was an early 20th century theologian whose Christology was marked by something called the “munus triplex.” This was a belief in the threefold office of Christ as a prophet, priest, and a king. This three-sided nature of Christ combined his “wisdom, righteousness, and redemption; truth, love, and power.” As a prophet Jesus speaks words of wisdom and truth. As a priest he performs the ultimate sacrifice of love and mercy. As a king he rules in power and justice. He is and does all three.

Bavinck argues that all of those who follow this Christ as prophet, priest, and king are called to actively respond and reflect his truth, his love, and his power. Disciples are not merely recipients but agents
of this prophetic, priestly, and kingly reign.

Diverse Christians are called in diverse places to the ministries of love and mercy, justice and power, wisdom and truth. Some will be called into law or business, politics or education, science or service. All will be called to reflect the diverse callings of Christ in diverse places.

What does this mean for this debate over Muslim immigration? Some Christians will be called to prophetically criticize Islamophobia as activists. Here they will be called to reflect and speak Christ’s prophetic truth on behalf of Muslim dignity. Others will be called to positions of power in politics, business, and leadership. Here they must reflect Christ’s royal justice which is for the flourishing of Christian and Muslim alike. Others will be called to positions of healing, service, and restoration in hospitals, schools, and neighborhoods. Here they must reflect Christ’s priestly sacrifice of peace and reconciliation between the West and Islam.

Rather than framing their Muslim neighbors as the objects of their own visions of truth, justice, and redemption, Christians are called to offer them up to Christ and humbly assume the posture of a servant and a steward. For it is ultimately Christ (and not the Christian) who will declare and enact the ultimate truth, love, and justice.

Engaging Muslims is not only for the professionals; it is for all disciples who have been called by their savior to the ministry of reconciliation, justice, and truth.

**Conclusion**

We have only just begun to taste the vast conceptual and spiritual richness that is available to those who will explore the kaleidoscopic grace and mercy of Christ for this debate over Muslim immigration. The narrow, flat, and myopic frameworks of both the right and the left will not do. Both threat and need-based frameworks fail. They fail to make real space, they fail to cultivate deep humility, they fail to inspire honest vulnerability, and they fail to call for deep engagement.
Endnotes

1 Jesus is, of course, much more than a lens or a framework. He is not simply a “way of seeing” other people; he is a way of living with other people as well. Furthermore, a Muslim is not a flat two-dimensional figure to be framed from a distance; Muslims are complex, dynamic, and three-dimensional living-and-breathing human beings who must be listened to, befriended, and engaged.

2 Stephen Edmondson, Calvin’s Christology (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 224.

3 Schilder, “Christ Disrobed,” 186.

4 Schilder, “Christ Disrobed,”

In short, Christ calls those who follow him to “step through” their interpretive frameworks and actually engage their neighbors in an embodied relationship.


10 Boersma, Violence, Hospitality, and the Cross, 26.

The Emergence of the Conservative Legal Movement and Public Theology in the Context of U.S. Supreme Court Justices Appointment

The 2016 U.S. presidential election not only elected Donald Trump as the President, it also marked the emergence of the Conservative Legal Movement and the Public Theology Movement. The significance of these two movements is played out in the context of the U.S. Supreme Court in its appointments of justices and decisions, at a time when the freedom of religion and freedom of speech are threatened. This article briefly examines the rise of the two movements, the theological grounding for public theology, particularly from the Neo-Calvinistic teaching of Abraham Kuyper, the unique status of the 2016 Supreme Court, and the implications from the cases adjudicated by or pending before the Supreme Court. This article posits that in an effort to assure free exercise of the rights to religion and free speech, these two movements energize the religious community to focus on the significance of Supreme Court justice nominations and appointments by the U.S. president. The article also warns against the unintended danger of a desire to establish a religious commonwealth and the rejection of dialoging in our pluralistic culture.

A Movement Like This: Conservative Legal Movement

The legal system has always played an important role in shaping the cultures and lives of the American people. During the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s, people turned to the law to provide the legal standards in interpretation of the Constitution to protect and
guarantee individuals’ civil rights. The culture was then gradually changed to embrace ideas ranging from desegregation of schools, voting rights, to same sex marriage rights. The law in no doubt shapes public opinions and cultures.

Beginning in the 1970s, the more conservative segment of the population began to realize the importance of the law. Rather than relying upon the assumed conservative or religious culture that once existed to guide their lives, conservative leaders began to organize legal scholars, public interests groups, and potential candidates for the judiciary as an effort to reclaim the cultural and political influence. This movement is referred as the “Conservative Legal Movement.” In his book titled *The Rise of the Conservative Legal Movement: The Battle for Control of the Law*, Steven Teles summarizes the rise and the errors of the Conservative Legal Movement.¹ The book first points to the rise of the Liberal Legal Network in the 1960s which dominated the legal profession, law schools, and public interest law groups. To counter this liberal movement, the Conservative Legal Movement mobilizes conservative legal organizations and professionals to engage in legal academia and foster conservative policies. One of the significant activities by the Conservative Legal Movement is to recruit conservative legal professionals to join the judiciary. Several organizations were named as major participants in the Conservative Legal Movement. Among them, the Federalist Society is a prominent one. Teles’ book highlights the role of the Federalist Society. Its importance was obvious when President Trump issued a list of twenty-one potential Supreme Court justice nominees. Nine of them were speakers at the 2016 Federalist Society annual convention just a week after the election.² According to an article on Slate.com, the Federalist Society allegedly met with then president-elect Trump to discuss the nomination process and did the vetting for the president. Particularly, it provides a list of prospective judges for the appointment to the federal bench.

There are also other grass-root groups such as the Pacific Justice Institute and the Family Research Council which aim to provide the Christian community information on legal developments on court cases and legislations in different states. In addition, these groups engage in lobbying efforts to promote a conservative Christian agenda. This is evident in the traditional marriage campaign in the last
decade. From the promulgation of Proposition 8 in California attempting to define traditional marriage as a union between a man and a woman, to providing legal defense for those involving the exercise of religion and other civil liberties, these groups gradually increase the impact of the Conservative Legal Movement.

In short, there have been unsuccessful attempts such as the traditional marriage campaign and other trials and errors. However, the Movement was successful in educating and raising awareness within the Christian community of the importance of the law and the Supreme Court justice appointment. Christians are mobilized to voice their concerns. Indirectly, the Movement also influenced the 2016 U.S. presidential election. The support from the evangelical community for candidate Trump during the election was also evidence of the impact of this movement.

**Another Movement:**

**Embracing Public Theology**

This Conservative Legal Movement is accompanied and supported by an increasing importance of public theology in the theological arena. This article uses the term “Public Theology Movement” to refer to the growing recognition of public theology. This movement draws from many streams of theology such as the social gospel movement and Christian ethics. At times, the term “Church and Society Movement” is also used to refer to the increasing awareness for Christians to engage in society. The term “public theology” was first used in the 1960s by Martin Marty. Marty refers “public theology” to Christians’ effort to draw on scriptural and doctrinal sources in speaking to public issues. Public theology predicates on a faith that seeks to understand the relation between Christian convictions and the broader social and cultural context within which the Christian community lives. Together with the Reformed theology promulgated by Neo-Calvinists such as Abraham Kuyper and Herman Bavinck, the call for public engagement of one’s faith has grown in acceptance over the years. Public theology encourages the practice of one’s beliefs in all aspects of their daily lives: family, work, and charity deeds, to name a few. Despite diverging opinions and disagreements of different groups in society, public theology advocates on the co-existence and discussions among opposing groups. It should be emphasized that engaging discussions with groups of opposing views is not a betrayal or a watering-down of one’s beliefs.
Neo-Calvinism argues for collaboration with the public in carrying the “cultural mandate” delineated in Genesis 1:28. One of the major writings of Neo-Calvinism is Our Program written by Abraham Kuyper back in the late 19th century. Among the many topics covered in Our Program, one concerns the judiciary. Kuyper wrote: “Thus the independence of judges comes down to this, that once they are installed they need concern themselves only with the laws and simply judge cases as honest men according to the dictates of their conscience, without asking for the sovereign’s preference, whim, or fancy.” The ideal is that judges will adjudicate with honesty according to their conscience. The “conscience” is derived from the presence of eternal principles to which judges and governments should adhere. Yet, the eternal principles are not imposed upon the people. To effectively transform a culture, Kuyper proposes Christians in all walks of lives, particularly in the judiciary and government, to exert their influence through their conduct and participation. Public theology therefore seeks to encourage Christians to engage and participate in society. Christians are the salt and the light of the world. They practice their faith convictions in every walk of their lives. This movement began to gain recognition as religious groups such as the Center for Faith and Work were formed, encouraging the religious community to pay attention to the theological implications on their lives.

**A Watershed Time for the U. S. Supreme Court**

To appreciate the significance of this watershed time of the Supreme Court in the context of the 2016 presidential election, a brief summary on the role of the U.S. Supreme Court is warranted. The Supreme Court is tasked to interpret the Constitution and to adjudicate disputes on federal legal issues, between states, and between citizens of different states. Its decisions set the precedents and laws for the country for decades to come. In 2016, the nine Supreme Court justices were basically grouped into two camps. Ginsburg, Breyer, Kagan and Sotomayor were considered the “liberal” group. On the other hand, Roberts, Thomas, Alito, and the late Scalia were in the “conservative” group. As all decisions by the Supreme Court are by a simple majority vote, the swing vote was Justice Kennedy. Justice Scalia died in 2016, leaving a vacancy to be filled by the president. The Supreme Court justices are nominated by the president and confirmed by the Senate.
With three justices (Ginsburg, Breyer, and Kennedy) in or approaching their 80s and justice Scalia’s vacancy, president Trump as the 45th U.S. president can possibly appoint three to four Supreme Court justices during his term from 2017 to 2020. This unprecedented opportunity could potentially alter the composition of the Court for decades to come. The appointment of Justice Gorsuch for Justice Scalia’s seat already proves to be important in light of the decisions rendered by the Court in 2017.

**The Battle over Fundamental Rights under the U.S. Constitution**

One of the fundamental rights protected by the Bills of Rights (the first ten amendments to the U.S. Constitution) is the First Amendment. Among other rights, it protects the right of freedom of religion and freedom of speech. In 1898, the 14th Amendment was adopted which guarantees equal protection of the laws. The original 14th Amendment does not list out the areas of “equal protection of the laws.” In 1964, Congress passed the Civil Rights Act which prohibits discrimination against anyone based on factors such as race, gender, and religion. For decades, the Court has interpreted the meanings of “due process” and “equal protection of the laws” clauses under the 14th Amendment.

For years, a divisive battle in the U.S. culture has been the battle over same-sex marriages. Finally, in 2015, in *Obergefell v. Hodges*, the Supreme Court by a 5-4 vote, upheld same-sex marriages in all fifty states, and ruled that the right to marry is a fundamental right protected by the equal protection clause of the 14th Amendment. With this decision, sexual orientation became one of the protected grounds covered by the Civil Rights Act and the 14th Amendment. While the right of same sex individuals to get married or to enjoy benefits as spouses now guaranteed, the consequential question is about the religious and speech rights of those who oppose homosexuality due to their religious beliefs. The Conservative Legal Movement has been in the forefront in galvanizing the religious community to fight the trend. The battle continues after *Obergefell*. Now, the issue is whether the exercise of the right to religion and free speech violates the equal protection clause.

Not surprisingly, some of the cases argued and currently pending before the Supreme Court are exactly on this issue. Three cases stand out and will have potentially significant consequences. The first one is...
Gloucester County School Board v. G.G.. In this case, a local school district, which is a public entity, is denied government funding by failing to allow a transgendered student to use bathrooms of the gender of his choice. The case is anchored on an executive order issued by President Obama. President Trump vacated the Obama executive order. The Supreme Court therefore remanded the case back to the Court of Appeals for decision in light of the change in this education policy, thus sidestepping the issue. However, the “bathroom” debate continues. States promulgated conflicting policies. This issue will eventually be litigated before the Supreme Court.

The second case is Trinity Lutheran Church of Columbia v. Comer. Here, the issue is whether a Lutheran school can be denied government funding to build a playground solely due to its religious affiliation. On June 26, 2017 the Supreme Court ruled that the state of Missouri violated the school’s freedom in exercising its right to religion. This decision affirms religious organizations their religious rights and therefore should be allowed equal access to funding to serve the communities, engaging in the public, and demonstrating their religious beliefs. It should be noted that Justice Gorsuch was among the justices who voted to uphold the rights of the Lutheran Church. This decision is paramount. It keeps the door open for and enables religious organizations to participate in civil charity works by guaranteeing them equal access to government resources.

The third case is Masterpiece Cakeshop, Ltd. v. Colorado Civil Rights Commission. In this case, the issue is whether a company owned by a Christian baker can refuse to bake a wedding cake for a gay couple for their wedding. The significance of the Masterpiece Cakeshop case is whether one’s personal religious right and freedom can

For Further Reading

Our Program: A Christian Political Manifesto by Abraham Kuyper (translated and edited by Harry Van Dyke)

The Rise of the Conservative Legal Movement: The Battle for Control of the Law by Steven M. Tele

Constructing a Public Theology: The Church in a Pluralistic Culture by Ronald F. Thiemann
be extended to the workplace. This case hinges on the right of Christians in exercising their individual religious rights in their workplace versus the non-discrimination laws affirmed by the *Obergefell* case. Further implications include the other individual rights protected under the Constitution. The Supreme Court heard oral arguments in December 2017 and their decision can have pivotal consequence.

In addition to legal cases, the battle is also over general freedom of speech. Can someone legitimately claim the protection of freedom of religion and freedom of speech for speeches that might discriminate people with the same-sex orientation? In light of the *Obergefell* case, the logical extension is that anyone who makes a statement to the effect that homosexuality is a sin can possibly be found guilty of violating the 14th Amendment and illegal discrimination against homosexual people. This battle has already played out on university campuses where conservative groups are discouraged to speak up. In times like this, the Supreme Court's upcoming decisions are vital and could be a game changer for the course of Christians' engagement in public theology.

Undoubtedly, the appointment of Justice Gorsuch to the Supreme Court has already made an impact on the cases mentioned above. As discussed, Justice Gorsuch was one of justices who in the *Trinity Church* case ruled to guarantee religious organizations their rights to public funding. The Conservative Legal Movement and the growing recognition of public theology provide the much needed input of a Christian agenda in America's society. The Supreme Court ensures the room and freedom to express this conservative theological position.

**Unintended Danger and the Need for Pluralistic Dialogue**

For proponents of the Conservative Legal Movement and the Public Theology Movement, it is tempting to foster the idea of instituting a holy commonwealth and the only task for Christians is to simply keep the religious government in place. Kuyper had warned against theocracy where the church or the religious community dictates the acceptable government actions. He also rejected the idea where the government and the church are combined as one. Either scenario would be dangerous. Christians risk to believe in building a Christian commonwealth as the ultimate goal. When politics and religion are combined, both the government and people are prone to abuse. Furthermore,
by building a religious state, Christians ignore the importance of learning how to live with those who disagree with them. Kuyper argues that the witnessing should be through the individual conduct and contacts with non-believers, but not through the law. Therefore, if the Conservative Legal Movement and Public Theology Movement seek to establish a religious commonwealth, there would be the unintended danger. People should be guaranteed of the freedom to practice their religious convictions; the cases discussed above prove the importance of such freedom. However, they should not be extended to become an imposition of a religious rule.

Ronald Thiemann, in *Constructing a Public Theology*, reminds Christians that the righteous judge in Isaiah 16:3-5 is one who genuinely seeks justice, renders his decisions out of love, and always remembers the mercy from God, even for the parties who fail to acknowledge God.11 Similarly, John Inazu in his book *Confident Pluralism* discusses the importance of having discourses and dialogues among people who disagree. This willingness to dialogue with opponents is a part of witnessing. On the other extreme, when faced with disappointment, Christians may respond with unending complaints and an ultimate rejection to engage the culture. At the end, it leads to a cynical attitude but not effectively transforming the cultures.

Thus, effective witnessing is through individual contacts and sharing, rather than through regulations. However, witnessing requires freedom to express. The Supreme Court decisions are essential for such freedom. Protecting a public space to engage in public proclamation of one’s religious is crucial. The availability of space for expressions without fear is an area where the jurisprudence can protect and ensures public theology can flourish. Yet, the witnessing task does not end with the battles of individual rights in court. The religious community needs to be encouraged in engaging in public dialogue with groups of opposing views, even to the point that they reject God. This is a task of which the Conservative Legal Movement needs to be reminded.

**Conclusion**

The Conservative Legal Movement provides the much needed awakening for the Christian community to pay attention to the legal development of our culture and the potentials of the law. The Public Theology Movement encourages Christians to
Abraham Kuyper teaches that Christians’ indirect influence is the most effective approach in transforming a culture, as opposed to building up a Christian commonwealth. Dialoguing with the non-believing society is crucial for this cultural transformation. The Supreme Court’s justice appointment is to ensure the freedom for the conservative religious group to express their religious view without the fear of prosecution. Thus, the importance of the justices’ appointment cannot be underestimated. However, the need for Christians to influence their lives and conduct is even more significant.

**Endnotes**


11 Thiemann, *Constructing a Public Theology*, p. 103.
Christianity and Culture: Who Is Truth?

Over 2,000 years ago, Pontius Pilate asked his now-famous question, “What is truth?” In the light of “fake news” and exhortations to “find your truth,” the question seems especially relevant now, but let’s put that historical text into context:

Pilate said to Him, “So You are a king?” Jesus answered, “You say correctly that I am a king. For this I have been born, and for this I have come into the world, to testify to the truth. Everyone who is of the truth hears My voice.” Pilate said to Him, “What is truth?” (John 18:37-38, NASB).

Reportedly, Pilate didn’t wait for an answer but told the religious leaders who had assembled in the hall of judgment, “I find no guilt in Him,” which, of course, was the truth about the totally guiltless Jesus.

The Who of Truth

Then and now, truth comes from hearing Jesus’ voice. Lord willing, we’re able to do that each time we read the Gospels, but Pilate had no such advantage. Nevertheless, as he stood face to face with Jesus, he faced The Truth, albeit fleetingly, for, as John described, “Pilate came out again and said to (the crowd), ‘Behold, I am bringing Him out to you so that you may know that I find no guilt in Him’” (John 19:4).

Are you taken by the fact, as I am, that an upper class Roman ruler known for his appalling cruelty kept trying to find a way to release an itinerant Jew, whom he perceived to be guilt-free? As Christians, we take the purity and holiness of Christ as one of the basic tenets of our faith and the requisite for ending animal sacrifices on any altar, but who would expect a confirmation of the truth of Jesus as the One Sinless Sacrifice to atone for our sins to come from Pontius Pilate? It’s as though Pilate believed the Who of the truth the Lord told him without knowing what that
truth might mean to himself and to the rowdy crowd who called for Jesus’ death.

To bring both the Who and what of truth into current headlines, let’s not take my word for it! To discern what’s fake and what’s not, we need God’s Word about truth as expressed in 192 verses in the New American Standard Bible. Over half of the references in the New Testament come from the writings of John, but the Who of truth began in the beginning when the infamous serpent challenged Adam and Eve with the implied question, “Did God really mean what He said?”

According to Genesis 3, the serpent thought not. Worse, he distorted God’s Word and pure motives by saying, “For God knows that in the day you eat from it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil” (Genesis 3:5).

Unfortunately, a splinter of truth in that lie pricked the innocent couple’s curiosity and enticed them to be knowledgeable and wise, instead of believing God’s word to them.

As the Bible records that momentous event, the couple disobeyed specific instructions instead of standing firm on their belief in God’s truth, pure motives, and goodness. At that moment, they spiritually died, and, ever since, people have had a hard time taking a stand for God. Worse, many have continued to believe that the word of God — the Truth revealing all truth — doesn’t really mean what it says!

That same record of mankind’s fall in the garden accounted for an ongoing rift between life and death, good and evil, truth and lies until, as Pilate learned, Jesus came into the world to “testify to the truth” by teaching, preaching, healing, and fully integrating God’s Word into Himself.

1 John 2:22 explains, “Who is the liar but the one who denies that Jesus is the Christ? This is the antichrist, the one who denies the Father and the Son.” So, as we believe in Jesus Christ as the Son of God, we’re braced and embraced by the Truth.

**God’s Word is Truth; There’s No Lie in It**

In the view of many peoples and cultures, truth is relative and, therefore, subject to opinion and change, but this could not be further from God’s reality! God does not change. Christ Jesus does not change, nor does truth change — even when presented in the variety of translations of God’s Word from one language into another.

Have you noticed, for example,
in any translation how the Bible does not cover-up erroneous acts and thoughts of even the most spiritually-minded people? Those of us who attended Bible classes as children almost always heard of the mighty patriarchs and matriarchs of faith such as Abraham and Sarah but didn’t hear the full biblical account of how he lied to save himself and she laughed at God’s personal word to her. Or we discussed King David, the man after God’s own heart, without knowing the entire story of how he coveted the wife of one of his finest, most trustworthy soldiers so much that he had the man stationed on the front lines where it was certain he would be killed. (He was.) Or we heard how early Christians prayed together and stayed together as one amicable body without knowing all of the true story in the Bible that tells how Paul and Barnabas parted ways in a squabble over Mark.

The Bible does not gloss over our mistakes, problems, or sins. As 2 Samuel 7:28 tells us, “Now, O Lord God, You are God, and Your words are truth.”

Truth has no need to cover up truth. Rather, truth reveals itself. When God revealed Himself to Elijah, “The Lord passed by in front of him and proclaimed, ‘The Lord, the Lord God, compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in lovingkindness and truth’” (Exodus 34:6). If God’s Word says God abounds in truth, why would we ever doubt that?

**Jesus is God’s Word on Truth**

And the Word became flesh, and dwelt among us, and we saw His glory, glory as of the only begotten from the Father, full of grace and truth.... For the Law was given through Moses; grace and truth were realized through Jesus Christ (John 1:14, 17).

The beloved apostle John recognized the truth in Jesus, and we have his word on that. More important, we have Jesus’ own word about His embodiment of the truth when He said:

So Jesus was saying to those Jews who had believed Him, “If you continue in My word, then you are truly disciples of Mine; and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free.” They answered Him, “We are Abraham’s descendants and have never yet been enslaved to anyone; how is it that You say, ‘You will become free?’” Jesus answered them, “Truly, truly, I say to you, everyone who commits sin is the slave of sin. The slave does not remain in the house forever; the son does remain forever. So if the Son makes you free, you will be free indeed” (John 8:32-36).
Forgiven by God and forgiving others with God’s help, we’re free to become the persons God intended us to be. More than “finding our truth,” we find ourselves as children of God with inherent characteristics of our Father inherited in our spiritual DNA. This frees us to be a working, vital part of the Body of Christ, which then frees us to incorporate the Body as a light to the nations — not to shine on ourselves but to be a bright streetlight everywhere along The Way.

As Jesus told us and all of His followers, “I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father but through Me” (John 14:6).

When we accept Jesus at His word and believe He truly is the Way, the Truth, and the Life everlasting, we’re far more likely to recognize fake news for what it is and put private opinions and prejudices into perspective because we now have a center from which the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth emanates: Christ Jesus.

The Who of Truth Shows us What Truth Is

Unchanging truth can best be described as “absolute” — something unaffected by popular opinion or discoveries supposedly bringing “new truths” to light. Indeed, what we consider to be “facts” today or what hear to be “true” might not be deemed so tomorrow.

Truth and factual data are not the same. The better we know what God’s Word says about God and us, the more we recognize the difference between absolute truth and fickle information once thought to be true.

For some examples of absolute Truth:

- God is love.
- God is One.
- God did not create us from nothing but from Something — Himself and His own love and goodness.
- No one but Christ is perfect. All of us have sinned.
- God wants all of us to be saved.
- We’re meant to love God with all of our heart, soul, mind, spirit, and strength.
- We’re meant to love other people as ourselves.
- We’re meant to love ourselves.
- Jesus Christ loves us.
- God can be wholly trusted.

Considering those absolutes brings into a clearer light the relativistic ways of thinking apt to confuse us or get in our way.

To help us pinpoint potential
flaws in our thought processes, we might also honestly answer such truth-revealing questions as:

- Does God really mean what He says?
- Is the truth welcomed in my life, my culture?
- Will the truth expose my true motives?
- Am I willing to face my motives, flaws, fears, guilt, greed, envy, anger, jealousy, embarrassment, hurt feelings, grudges, or false self?
- Will facts I think are true bear up to further investigation, time, and changing information or fads?
- Do I honestly think God Almighty loves me?

Earlier I mentioned that the NASB includes 192 verses on truth. Obviously, we don’t have space to consider them all in depth, but let’s look at some of the verses that might help us to identify godly truths and be quicker to discern the presence or absence of it in our culture and our own lives.

**People devoted to the truth will be found as we focus on biblical criteria.**

Furthermore, you shall select out of all the people able men who fear God, men of truth, those who hate dishonest gain; and you shall place these over them as leaders of thousands, of hundreds, of fifties and of tens (Exodus 18:21).

Whether God makes a promise or we do, a promise is a pledge of truth, vowing to do what has been said.

Now therefore, please swear to me by the Lord, since I have dealt kindly with you, that you also will deal kindly with my father’s household, and give me a pledge of truth (Joshua 2:12).

Truth is sincere. It does not pretend nor honor false gods.

Now, therefore, fear the Lord and serve Him in sincerity and truth; and put away the gods which your fathers served beyond the River and in Egypt, and serve the Lord (Joshua 24:14).

Speaking truth in your heart means being honest with yourself — no self-deception.

He who walks with integrity, and works righteousness, And speaks truth in his heart (Psalm 15:2).

Truth comes to the light. In light of truth, we’re safely lead.

O send out Your light and Your truth, let them lead me; Let them bring me to Your holy hill And to Your dwelling places (Psalm 43:3).

Truth does not end. The truth goes on and on.

For Your lovingkindness is great to
the heavens And Your truth to the clouds (Psalm 57:10).

Nature gives strong evidence of truth.

Truth springs from the earth And righteousness looks down from heaven (Psalm 85:11).

Bible laws, Bible wisdom, and Bible prophecies speak truth.

You are near, O Lord, And all Your commandments are truth (Psalm 119:151).

The sum of Your word is truth, And every one of Your righteous ordinances is everlasting (Psalm 119:160).

Truth is priceless.

Buy truth, and do not sell it, Get wisdom and instruction and understanding (Proverbs 23:23).

Do not expect people who act in an ungodly manner to deal truthfully.

Everyone deceives his neighbor And does not speak the truth, They have taught their tongue to speak lies; They weary themselves committing iniquity (Jeremiah 9:5).

True justice and peace depend on the truth.

These are the things which you should do: speak the truth to one another; judge with truth and judgment for peace in your gates (Zechariah 8:16).

Simply being in Jesus’ presence evokes the truth.

But the woman fearing and trembling, aware of what had happened to her, came and fell down before Him and told Him the whole truth (Mark 5:33).

Truth does not fear exposure.

But he who practices the truth comes to the Light, so that his deeds may be manifested as having been wrought in God (John 3:21).

Truth brings us closer to God.

God is spirit, and those who worship Him must worship in spirit and truth (John 4:24).

Facing the truth is freeing.

If you continue in My word, then you are truly disciples of Mine; and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free (John 8:31-32).

The Holy Spirit helps us to discern the truth.

But when He, the Spirit of truth, comes, He will guide you into all the truth; for He will not speak on His own initiative, but whatever He hears, He will speak; and He will disclose to you what is to come (John 16:13.)

Some people do not want to hear the truth.

So have I become your enemy by telling you the truth? (Galatians 4:16).

Truth must be tempered with
love to effect change and growth.

But speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in all aspects into Him who is the head, even Christ (Ephesians 4:15).

Investigate to find the truth. Keep each finding in context.

Be diligent to present yourself approved to God as a workman who does not need to be ashamed, accurately handling the word of truth (2 Timothy 2:15).

Envy, arrogance, and ambition battle with truth.

But if you have bitter jealousy and selfish ambition in your heart, do not be arrogant and so lie against the truth (James 3:14).

Confession prepares the way for truth.

If we say that we have no sin, we are deceiving ourselves and the truth is not in us (1 John 1:8).

Truth bears loving action.

Little children, let us not love with word or with tongue, but in deed and truth (1 John 3:18).

Further Reading

The New Revised Standard Version (NRSV) of the Bible includes 181 verses on truth, the English Standard Version (ESV) 139, and the New International Version (NIV) 137. Although these overlap most of the scriptural references to truth in the NASB, each translation of God’s Word often reveals additional facets of each biblical gem.

For more insight into God’s perspective on truth, variations in translations of the Bible also add depth to our understanding. For instance, the NIV has 123 verses using the word “true,” whereas NRSV has 151, ESV 110, and NASB 86. In the latter, for example, we find:

When a prophet speaks in the name of the Lord, if the thing does not come about or come true, that is the thing which the Lord has not spoken. The prophet has spoken it presumptuously; you shall not be afraid of him (Deuteronomy 18:22).

Finally, brethren, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is of good repute, if there is any excellence and if anything worthy of praise, dwell on these things (Philippians 4:8).
Cultivating Reflection and Response
Compartmentalizing Corrupts Culture

I’m male. I compartmentalize. Partly due to Creation, partly due to Fall.

If you’re female and have ever spent any significant time with males, you’ve undoubtedly noticed this trait. To take it a step further, men typically have a “nothing” box. The wife’s question, “What are you thinking about, honey?” can sometimes honestly be answered with, “Nothing.” I wasn’t thinking about anything at all, not even the game on the screen in front of me. Who knew that you’d get a free marriage counseling session just from reading this article?

Some aspects of compartmentalizing can be very helpful. All hell can literally be breaking loose in some aspect of life, while duty requires hell to be at least temporarily contained in a box and neatly put on a shelf, so that the critical issue at hand can be addressed. Hell will have to wait.

Some professions require compartmentalizing proficiency – first responders come to mind. All of us encounter seasons and days where some boxes will help us organize and get something accomplished – even if that something is simply living through the day and waking up to the promise of a new day.

But the compartmentalization highway is not adorned entirely with roses.

If It Was Easy, Jesus Wouldn’t Have Prayed For It

Unity, the highly intentional theme of Jesus’ so called “High Priestly Prayer” recorded in John 17, requires decompartmentalizing. Jesus prays that our unity would be so harmonious, involving so many difference voices all singing off the same sheet of music, that the world would notice and immediately conclude, “Such love for one another must come from a heavenly source. No mere human attempts to be nice to one another.
could explain what I’m seeing and experiencing.” All our various religious and cultural compartments: denomination, theological stream, ethnicity, gender, geography, economics, generation, profession – all of them are designed to work together into one great tapestry (a textile example), team (a sports example), symphony (a music example), body (an anatomy example), and body of Christ (a New Testament example). When various diverse parts unite under the head of Jesus Christ, the world notices. Our culture is starving for decompartmentalizing in the name of and under the direction of Christ Jesus.

My day job is to see Jesus’ prayer answered in my city. If it was easy, Jesus wouldn’t have prayed for it. Jesus went to his knees over this topic because he believed that a clear command was insufficient, having given that simple command hours earlier, and powerfully illustrated it by personal example in John 13. Peter had to learn that his strong will, a gift from God with a curse so easily lurking in the shadows, can’t be compartmentalized off from the work of the Spirit. Peter’s bold words melted under the slightest threat. James and John had to learn that Jesus’ work wasn’t compartmentalized in the twelve, and that calling down fire from heaven to consume those who hadn’t gotten it yet doesn’t exactly bring honor to the Father. They all had to learn that the Kingdom of God can’t be compartmentalized into political power – though the opposite could be said in our day, too, that political power shouldn’t be exempt from the transforming influence of the Kingdom of God.

I work for a ministry (4Tucson.com) that strives toward the high goal of city transformation. Unity isn’t the end, it’s the means to the end. Jesus prays in John 17:23, “I in them and you in me, that they may become completely one, so that the world may know that you have sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me.” Is there anything we want our unsaved family and neighbors to know more than the identity of Jesus and the love of God? Those are the two outcomes of Jesus’ prayer for unity. By collaborating, by decompartmentalizing, an entire city can bring honor and glory to God – i.e., city transformation. If a city’s generational, systemic problems were addressed such that every resident received more of God’s blessing in his/her life, the entire God consciousness of the community would rise, in addition to the innate value of the blessings themselves.

When Jesus taught in Matthew
5 that “You are the salt of the earth... you are the light of the world,” two very critical distinctions must be made if we’re to properly grasp what he was saying. First, the “you” is plural. Really plural. The “you” certainly includes individuals, but it can never be limited to individuals. John 17:23 again – it’s our unity, our harmony, our breaking down of all the dividing walls of hostility, our decompartmentalizing... that will flavor and enlighten the culture around us to come to know more of God’s transforming identity and love. And second, Jesus doesn’t state this as a command: “You ought to be salt and light.” He states it as a fact. We’ll flavor the culture either with our unity or our division, our isolation or our integration. We will impact the culture, for better or worse.

**Unity, humility, and maturity**

I’m more convinced by the day that unity will go as far as humility takes it. And no further. I believe that’s one of the reasons why John 17 has the subject matter that it does. *Everything* good starts with humility. Salvation itself starts with humility; until we humble ourselves and realize that being lord of our own lives isn’t working out so well, we have no appreciation or desire for a savior. Jesus’ prayer for unity is really a prayer for us to humble ourselves enough to realize that the world doesn’t revolve around us, around our denomination, our congregation, our ethnicity, our perspective, our domain, etc.

In Ephesians 4, the Apostle Paul gives an impassioned plea for unity. “Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love. Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit – just as you were called to one hope when you were called – one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all” (Eph. 4:2-6, NIV). The chapter goes on to address the topic of maturity, which is specifically articulated in verse 13 and described the rest of the chapter. Unity is a prerequisite for maturity. And humility is a prerequisite for unity. Without humility that shines forth in unity, we get to keep all our blind spots and never mature out of them. And we flavor the culture similarly.

It isn’t easy to get leaders from the business, healthcare, church, government, social services, and education domains (which comprise half of Tucson’s 12 domains) to collaborate on anything. Most of our city’s toughest problems remain unsolved because
of the compartmentalizing that’s so indicative of our independent, isolated mindset. I can’t imagine how it could ever happen apart from mutual submission to a common Lord, Jesus Christ. Yet it doesn’t take rocket science to realize that Christians have a hard enough time compartmentalizing spiritual issues (theology, etc.), let alone struggling with unredeemed “secular” perspectives. Unity in the church can lead to collaboration between Christ-followers in every domain. When that happens, entire cultures can be flavored, preserved, enlightened, and transformed.

John 17 is our Lord’s Prayer that he prayed. What we usually refer to as The Lord’s Prayer is the prayer example that Jesus taught. It begins, “Our Father who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy Kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.” Jesus doesn’t teach us to pray merely that the Kingdom of God would come in so-called spiritual places, like church (though that would be a nice place to start!) He teaches us to pray for the ultimate decompartmentalizing – that heaven would invade earth, which includes the home I live in and the city I dwell in… that spiritual realities would penetrate everyday life. Martin Luther in his small catechism on The Lord’s Prayer taught that what we’re really praying is that I, the prayer, would keep God’s name holy; that God’s kingdom would come in me; that God’s will would be done starting in me. It takes transformed people to transform a community.

**My personal transformation story**

Over the last year I’ve changed my go-to definition of sanctification. Now it’s this: sanctification is the process by which the Holy Spirit decompartmentalizes our lives.

The moment we become Christian, a spiritual “compartment” gets created in us. I’m sure several more theologically-trained readers are doing back flips right about now, but cut me some slack and reserve judgment until the end of my argument. Our recognized need for a savior can lead to realizing at a heart level instead of merely at an intellectual level that what Jesus did 2000 years ago is intended to affect my life – not just my life after I die, but my life in the great here-after. Being Christian is more than merely acknowledging that Jesus is the Son of God – demons do that. There’s a lordship aspect to salvation as well. Compartmentalizing our mind apart from our will and our actions is not an option.
At first that spiritual compartment is quite small. All my old ways of doing life remain the same, but now there’s this new spiritual component to my life that I as a new believer actually hope grows. I invite the Holy Spirit to address my fears, expose my short-comings, correct the lies I’ve believed, transform how I think about God, self, and others, and transform how I respond to the people and circumstances of day-to-day living. Sanctification is the process of more and more of my life being transformed and renewed by the Holy Spirit, brought into alignment with Jesus and His Word.

I grew up in a Christian home, and honestly don’t remember a time before which I could say I didn’t know or love God. There was a spiritual compartment to my life that was real and treasured – if you’d tried to take it away, I might have fought you. Yet my spiritual compartment was having no impact at all on my self-esteem. Every time I’d use my sharp wit to insult my “friends” at school to compensate for how I felt about myself, my spiritual life was kept behind locked doors with the key nowhere in sight. I was 15 years old the first time I heard someone say that there’s no such thing as a Sunday Christian. I’m sure that concept had been spoken before, but my worldview, my compartmentalizing, filtered it out before it ever hit pay-dirt.

I was at a “citywide” youth conference when I heard those words at age 15. “Citywide” is in quotes because it wasn’t the whole city church – it was just Anglo Lutherans, and only the same brand of Lutherans to boot. Yet that compartment was still bigger than what I’d experienced before, which I’m sure helped create an environment where the Holy Spirit was given greater permission to go to work. And sanctification happened as a result. My view of myself changed. The way I interacted with my school “friends” changed. Courage replaced fear in multiple areas. Instead of being flavored by my environments, God in me began to do the flavoring; I for the first time was functioning healthily as the salt and light Jesus said we are.

I could look back at any point from age 15-22 and give thanks to God for the transformation that was taking place. College helped me meet Christians from other theological streams rather than just my own. I was preparing to attend seminary upon completion of my engineering bachelor’s degree when God broke down yet another compartment. I was anxious to get my undergrad work done so I could begin preparing for “ministry” when
God clearly broke in and said, “You’re going to wait and waste two years until you get to seminary, thinking that ministry starts then? Look around son! You’ll never interact with more people than the thousands you cross paths with every day. I need you doing ministry right now as an engineering student.” Ministry is our day job – all of us. It’s not limited to the compartment of the institutional church.

I’m not an anti-academic by any stretch, but my own personal experience is that an overly academic approach to faith (read: seminary) can be hazardous to one’s soul. The sanctification process can easily be replaced by studying sanctification from a theological vantage-point, while keeping the Holy Spirit at arms’ length. Perhaps the Holy Spirit’s decompartmentalizing work would have slowed down whether seminary had entered the picture or not; perhaps graduating from school, starting a family, and beginning a career are their own occupational hazards. I don’t know. What I do know is that by my mid-20’s, I was creating compartments faster than the Holy Spirit was breaking them down. My congregation got the bulk of my ministry attention, while my family got the leftovers. Responsibility for the growth and health of the congregation that was paying me as their pastor trumped my theological view that my congregation and denomination were merely parts of a citywide body of Christ. I paid more attention to doing than being, and I eventually paid for all of the above with symptoms of burnout. You didn’t pick up Resonance in order to read my detailed life story, so I’ll oversimplify by concluding that God lets nothing go to waste. He doesn’t compartmentalize our failures from faithfulness, but rather transforms both for kingdom use. God used my burnout and the resulting life changes to lead me to change jobs from being a congregational pastor to working as a pastor in a citywide organization in 2011, 4Tucson.

For Further Reading

You Are the Light of Your City by Mark Harris
Jesus’ Surprising Strategy by David Drum
If It Was Easy, Jesus Wouldn’t Have Prayed For It by David Drum
Fast forward to a life-changing season in the Fall of 2017. While the sanctification process had made some headway in decompartmentalizing ministry at home from ministry through employment, work was rapidly becoming more demanding in terms of time, skill, and energy. In the midst of some significant transitions at my job, I facilitated a meeting that went poorly. My dramatic internal overreaction surprised me, as did the immediate onset of depression. I was diagnosed with depression in 1998 and had learned a lot over the years of battling it, but nothing I’d learned made a dent in this black cloud of depression. Equally surprising, a meeting I nearly cancelled out of due to low energy contained the very conversation that God used to spring me out of the pit. A Rwandan pastor shared about his ministry of discipling people around what it means to have your identity in Christ. He explained that the Rwandan genocide involved so-called Christians murdering each other, because their primary identity was still in their tribes rather than in Christ. Both the trips to and from the pit, and subsequent reflection in prayer and with others, revealed a serious crack in my foundation. When a spiritual director asked me to use some feeling words to describe what it’s like to have an identity in Christ, I was stumped. I had built up so many compartments that I couldn’t break through them even when asked.

One more scene and I can wrap up my story. Some of the medications I’d been taking made it very challenging to wake up in the morning. Over recent years I’d swallowed hook, line, and sinker a lie from the enemy that if I did unimportant things in the morning while trying to wake up, I could give God my best time and energy later. The results of that implemented belief were entirely predictable—my compulsive web-surfing for sports scores and other distractions grew, while my time with God became more and more a checklist squeezed into a tinier and tinier box. My longsuffering wife asked me a question that my brokenness, thankfully, allowed me to really hear and receive. “What if you woke up by journaling, which you like to do anyway, instead of all that other stuff?” Flipping that simple switch unlocked hours of meaningful time with the Lord. The Holy Spirit’s sanctifying presence began to go to work on compartment after compartment, revealing idols I’d built up in my life that I turned to for comfort in times of stress, rather than God. Past hurts were addressed, past fears confronted, relationships taken more seriously, and on and on. Those hours turned into days, days into weeks, and
weeks into months. As much sanctification has happened during and since that August/September express trip to the pit as at any time in my life. My internal transformation is obvious to those closest to me – just ask my wife. I still don’t know what I don’t know, but I learn something new every day, thanks to the harmony of various voices that my work environment enables.

Compartmentalizing corrupts culture, starting in my own life and rippling out from there. Transformed people are in much better position to transform culture than compartmentalized people are. Come, Holy Spirit. Come, Lord Jesus. In our lives, and in our cities.
Dwelling

Working in missions far from home, I am always on the lookout for ways to recollect and reconnect with those shimmering days of life back in the Sonoran desert, where I grew up and first came to faith.

Even here in Africa, I occasionally stumble across a Mexican restaurant and march right in, prepared to sample the cuisine and offer the management an informed opinion about the successes or failures of the dishes on offer. I pause without delay whatever else I am doing the moment I hear a Country song playing on the radio, and find my soul soars with nostalgia whenever I pass a Hyundai Tucson on the road.

The word Tucson brings to mind golden red sunsets and rugged mountain ranges, thunderstorms and prickly cactus, but the word Hyundai takes me back to a conversation I once had with a Korean pastor that helped me get my mind around the concept of transliterating a word, as compared with translating a word.

When you pronounce the Korean word 現代, it makes a sound which can best be represented by the English word Hyundai, which is an example of transliteration. However, if we translate the same Korean word 現代, matching the meaning and not the sound, we get the English word Modernity. The moment my friend and fellow believer shared this with me, I began to pick up other instances of transliteration all around me.

When people say the Hebrew word מִשְׁמֶרֶה, it sounds like Immanuel, but the English phrase which best captures its meaning we all know from Christmas sermons at church, God With Us. Or how about the Cyrillic word борщ? Transliterate it and we get the word Borscht, but translate it and we get the phrase, Beet Soup.

I find the distinction between these two methods of migrating words from one alphabet and language to another a handy tool for working on another personal...
project of mine, which is fitting the text of the Christian faith into the context of the culture to which I have been called, way down south.

Of course the peoples, the languages and the customs that live, move and have their being in Africa are not altogether unfamiliar with the religious tradition centered on the person of Jesus Christ. In fact, over the many years since my mission predecessors first landed on these fair shores, both the leaders and followers of the local social order have gone from transliterating, or borrowing the faith we hold so dear, to translating, or owning it in.

The Bible says we must not give up meeting together. So, along with the earlier practice of building stone and thatch structures that resemble western churches, I have seen Tswana Christians quite happy to gather in the shade of Acacia trees on Sunday morning and hold services wrapped in the cool breezes blowing through a cloudless sky.  

The Bible says sing praises unto God. So, in addition to using organs and hymn books, as introduced by representatives of high church denominations from Europe, I have watched Zulu Christians pound the solid ground with their feet and beat drums with their hands while sending their worship heavenward.

The Bible says pray without ceasing. So, beyond morning devotions and, as Americans here publicly demonstrated, praying before meals, I have witnessed Swazi Christians hold all night vigils which include not only praying for hours on end, but everyone praying out loud, at the same time, round the flickering light of an open fire.

Such shifts from borrowing the faith, a process through which its look and feel are adopted, to owning the faith, a process through which its meaning and purpose are embraced, often follow on the heels of a curious phenomenon I have personally seen surface in the contextualization enterprise, one that might provide us with a guiding principle for all our missions endeavors, including the task of fundraising.

In my experience, if you ask any preacher or teacher, counsellor or activist pioneering a ministry abroad what they need to take their work from good to great, to reach the vision which God has placed on their hearts, they will all say they need more prayer, because they feel it is their duty. However, if you ask what else, they will tell you they need more money to launch a new program, but
they will not use the word *money*. Rather, you will hear them say, “If we only had more resources at our disposal, then we can win back this city for the Lord.”

Shortly thereafter, you can patiently listen as they talk about their efforts in raising the cash required to cover the overhead for an existing project, without using the word *cash*, “We are focusing more and more on ministry partner development, so we can press on to take hold of that for which Christ has taken hold of us.”

Regardless of the ways in which we missionaries talk about fundraising, it is a burden we all carry around our shoulders, some while walking tall, others stooping under its weight. Adjusting that posture, getting those who labor with eternity in mind to raise funds in victory and not in defeat means approaching this blessed chore, I propose, with the same contextual sensitivity we summon up when preaching, teaching, evangelizing or any of the other more traditional ways we are called into His service.

But let us be clear on one point in particular here, we are not talking about raising funds to send missionaries from home into the missions field, but rather raising funds for the ministries missionaries lead once they get to the missions field, from local supporters while laboring alongside local associates. In other words, how do we migrate those familiar strategies for securing sufficient ministry capital, such that they are effective in a foreign setting?

How do we get around sending out donor letters in a country where the postal service does not function properly because its employees are on strike, or making donor calls in places where the phones do not work consistently because the cables have been stolen? How do we host a banquet in a land parched with drought, or organize a golf tournament in a community of soccer players? The chances of such initiatives leading to fiscal triumph are as likely as an online crowd funding campaign paying out when none of the people you want to contribute have ever even seen a credit card up close.

When I ask how, I am not being rhetorical, for I believe we really can find our way past the transliteration of fundraising and into its social and cultural translation, which brings us back to that curious phenomenon mentioned above, and to my central point for this missive, namely 1) we only keep the ground we take when advancing the Kingdom of God if our steps forward are firm
2) for those steps to be firm we must understand where we are placing our feet, and 3) the amount of traction we then gain will depend on whether or not both the Kingdom and those we hope will one day become its citizens enter into a process referred to by scholars of the Divine Trinity as *perichoresis*.

*Perichoresis*. Hold onto that fancy word for just a moment, so that I can first tell you a tale of the reality behind it being made manifest.

Shortly after I graduated from seminary, back in 2006, I started my second mission assignment overseas at a Methodist church on the edge of the Kalahari desert, in a town called Tshwane. My pastoral role within this congregation consisted of taking over its fledgling outreach program and growing it as much as the Lord would allow.

Having a few years of training and practice under my belt, I threw myself into the work of shepherding this flock with gusto, proposing to its members that the African church had already been won over to, and built up in the faith, so now it must take on the mantle of sending out ambassadors of the Gospel by heeding the words of Wesley himself, “Do all the good you can, by all the means you can, in all the ways you can, in all the places you can, at all the times you can, to all the people you can, as long as ever you can.”

I am happy to report that the response from the congregation was nothing short of spectacular. Before long, we were supporting dozens of partner organisations around the world, getting hundreds of volunteers from within the church involved, spiritually covering every move we made using prayer notices, prayer chains and prayer rallies.

We had people handing out Bibles in North Korea, feeding orphans in Ukraine, and building homes in Mozambique. Some took time off work to share the Good News on college campuses in America and others came out of retirement to help dig wells in Lesotho. One young architect even quit his job to join a sports ministry in Portugal.

Of course as the work of outreach grew, the need for money to support it grew also. There was only so much financial territory in the church budget we could take over, and when I started giving away our chapel furniture, the senior pastor told me it was time to consider other options.

We had already established an advisory council to lead and guide all those involved,
a group of people with professional and commercial savvy that decided, right when I was about to start writing letters and making phone calls, we should set up our ministry as an independent foundation instead and call it Ransom, because Jesus said He came, “not to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.”

Why a foundation? Well as the members of the council explained, if we wanted to grow our patron base in this part of the world, we would need to turn to businesses more, and individuals less. Most Africans believe charity starts at home, and ends at the offering basket, but if we got Ransom registered correctly, companies would be more than willing to give through it to some of our member organizations, and not only because of the eternal goals we were each diligently pursuing.

You see, for the national revenue service to offer a tax credit to a company for its charitable giving, the money it contributes must be allocated to what the government refers to as a Public Benefit Activity, and unlike in America, religious projects or institutions do not qualify. On top of that, if a company increased its giving so that the total amount thereof equates to two-percent of its net profits annually, then it will improve its Economic Empowerment status and have the regulatory right to tender with the government itself as a service provider.

Almost all of this was lost on me and my liberal arts background, but the hardy Methodist souls by whom I was surrounded assured me we were making the right moves, and that once these administrative protocols were in place, we could in fact position the foundation as a corporate social investment partner of note, taking Ransom from a good outreach initiative to a great one.

So we did exactly that, and even though I have since moved on, handing the reins of Ransom over to home grown stewardship, it continues to prevail upon the charitable landscape here in Tshwane. The potential for what God can do in and through us, as well as what we can do in and through God was unlocked when perichoresis, as it were, showed up and nudged the narrative in a new direction.

Originally used by theologians to describe the ways in which God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit relate to one another, we can think of perichoresis as a progression from mutual indwelling to mutual assimilation whereby, “genuine acceptance removes
fear and hiding and creates freedom to know and be known. In this freedom arises a fellowship and sharing so honest and open and real that persons involved dwell in one another. There is union without loss of individual identity.”

The freedom to know and be known, to influence and be influenced was, in some small way, the secret of success for Ransom I believe, because an American and his ministry model teamed up with some Africans and their policy insights, driven by a common vision for sustainable Kingdom advancement. What is more, I see in this fundraising experience the same progression from mutual indwelling to mutual assimilation that must be appear in those more normative faith-filled practices, like building churches and singing songs and saying prayers. The people who adopt the practices are transformed by them, but the practices are in turn transformed by the people that adopt them.

When it comes to discussions of contextualization, therefore, we trust that the Christian tradition continues to be owned by every tongue and tribe and nation because it remains supple in their hands, even as every tongue and tribe and nation has proven supple when they encounter the Christian tradition, the transcendence of one and the eminence of the other finding a new, balanced reality together.

And that, my friend, is the right point of departure, the healthiest posture for any given missionary, embarking on any given mission. Using the idea of *perichoresis* as our guiding principle necessitates relating to one another, and to our work not as we relate to God, but as God relates to Himself. In so doing, we take on the likeness of Christ, the first ambassador of the Gospel and the best of Kingdom advocates, He who translated the love of our Father in Heaven so that it could be embraced by His children here on earth.
Endnotes


3. Transparent Language: Everybody Loves Borscht, viewed on 14/03/2018, from https://blogs.transparent.com/russian/everybody-loves-%D0%B1%D0%BE%D1%80%D1%89-borscht/.

4. Hebrews 10:25, NIV.

5. Psalm 95, ERV.

6. 1 Thessalonians 5:16-18, ESV.


8. Matthew 20:28; Mark 10:45; John 13:1-17, NIV.

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Resonance is a new theological journal and this requires that I raise financial support to cover the journal’s production costs. Support will provide honorariums for writers and artists as well as cover the editorial, graphic design, and printing costs.

I ask you to prayerfully consider helping us do this. I am confident that God has prepared Resonance for such a time as this and I am excited to see how He will use this ministry to serve the Body of Christ throughout the years ahead.

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Your servant in Christ,

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