Sermon follow-up for 2/15/09, 2/22/09

Feb. 15, 2009 sermon: A TPC Manifesto: Aliens, but not Alienated; Aliens but not Alienating (1 Peter 2:4-12)

Feb. 22, 2009 sermon: Being a Missional Church in the Christ-Haunted South (1 Peter 2:4-12)

Rich Lusk

Some resources:

There is a lot of good material on 1 Peter, especially 1 Peter 2. This time around, I found the following helpful: Joel Green's 1 Peter commentary in the "Two Horizons" series, Karen Jobe's commentary in the "Baker Exegetical" series, Scott McKinght's 1 Peter commentary in the "NIV Life Application" series, Nelson Kloosterman's *Pilgrims among Pagans,* and the fascinating (if sometimes frustrating) essay by Miroslav Volf, "Soft Difference."

Michael Craven's website, The Center for Christ and Culture, includes a lot of helpful resources for the missional church: http://www.battlefortruth.org/

I highly recommend the works of Eugene Peterson, whom I quoted from extensively in the 2/15 sermon. My quotes were mainly from his book *Reversed Thunder.* Here is a portion of what I used:

> The gospel of Jesus Christ is more political than anyone imagines, but in a way no one guesses. The "kingdom of God," an altogether political metaphor, is basic vocabulary in understanding the Christian gospel. It is, at the same time, responsible for much misunderstanding. The political metaphor, "kingdom," insists on a gospel that includes everything and everyone under the rule of God. God is no religious glow to warm a dark night. Christ is no esoteric truth with which to form a Gnostic elite. The Christian faith is an out-in-the-open, strenuous, legislating, conquering totality. God is sovereign: nothing and no one is exempt form this rule.

Here are the Willimon quotes from 2/22 in full—

On the church as a culture:

> Christianity is a distinct culture with its own vocabulary, grammar, and practices. Too often, when we try to speak to our culture, we merely adopt the culture of the moment rather than present the gospel to the culture. Our time as preachers is better spent inculturating modern, late-twentieth-century Americans into that culture called church. When I walk into a class on introductory physics, I expect not to understand immediately most of the vocabulary, terminology, and concepts. Why should it be any different for modern Americans walking into a church?
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> This is why the concept of "user-friendly churches" often leads to churches getting used. There is no way I can crank the gospel down to the level where any American can walk in off the street and know what it is all about within 15 minutes. One can't do that even with baseball!
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> The other day, someone emerged from Duke Chapel after my sermon and said, "I have never heard anything like that before. Where on earth did you get that?"
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> I replied, "Where on earth would you have heard this before? After all, this is a pagan, uninformed university environment. Where would you hear this? In the philosophy department? Watching Mr. Rogers's Neighborhood? No, to hear this, you've got to get dressed and come down here on a Sunday morning."
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> It is a strange assumption for Americans to feel they already have the equipment necessary to comprehend the gospel without any modification of lifestyle, without any struggle — in short, without being born again. The point is not to speak to the culture. The point is to change it. God's appointed means of producing change is called "church"; and God's typical way of producing church is called "preaching"

Here's Willimon on community and personal identity:

> Though we love to think of ourselves as self-made people, in our better moments we know that who we are is a gift — the sum of the countless gifts we have been given by God and other people. As the great preacher Paul Scherer once said, "I've always lived my life in the red — a debtor to others who have given me so much." (A person who claimed to be "self-made" was once called, by a preacher of my acquaintance, a man built by unskilled labor.)

Here are the John Stott quotes I used on mission the last couple of weeks:

> Social responsibility becomes an aspect not of Christian mission only, but also of Christian conversion. It is impossible to be truly converted to God without being thereby converted to our neighbor.
>
> Jesus sends us into the world, as the Father sent him into the world. … In other words our mission is to be modeled on his. Indeed all authentic mission is incarnational mission. It demands identification without loss of identity. It means entering other people's worlds as he entered ours, though without compromising our Christian convictions, values, or standards.

Here is Karl Barth on the Trinitarian roots of the church's mission:

> Must not even the most faithful missionary, the most convinced friend of missions, have reason to reflect that the term missio was in the ancient Church an expression of the doctrine of the Trinity-namely the expression of the divine sending forth of self, the sending of the Son and Holy Spirit to the world? Can we indeed claim that we do it any other way?

Here is Charles Spurgeon on community and church membership:

> I believe that every Christian ought to be joined to some visible church; that is his plain duty, according to the Scriptures. God's people are not dogs, else they might go about one by one; but they are sheep, and therefore they should be in flocks.

The two sermon covered several areas: our love for the local community/city (Cahaba Heights/Birmingham) where God has placed us, church as community, church as mission, and church as politics. I will supplement what I said in the sermon in each of these areas.

ON LOVING THE CITY OF BIRMINGHAM AND THE PARISH OF CAHABA HEIGHTS:

It is my hope that we can eventually provide forums that will allow us to get to know Birmingham and Cahaba Heights better. We're trying to find someone who knows the Cahaba Heights area very well, and is willing to come make a presentation for us. Hopefully that will happen soon. We also want your input and help as the officers seek to sharpen and refine our vision as a city church.

As resident aliens in Birmingham, we are neither mere tourists here, taking advantage of what the city has to offer, while not caring about her long term well-being, nor are we so steeped in the culture of the city that we completely identify with it and mirror it. We are certainly not hostile to Birmingham, but neither do we want to simply leave her as she is. Instead, we want to serve the city in and through the gospel of Christ.

This mission takes shape in all kinds of ways. For example, we want use our gifts and resources not only for the benefit of our local church, but also on behalf of the city. Thus, we do not want our members with musical gifts singing only in the church choir; we also want them joining in city-wide choirs, operas, etc. We do want our members with monetary resources to funnel everything bit of extra giving into our building programs, but into ministries that serve the wider community of Birmingham. Etc.

Insofar as we are different from others living in Birmingham, we want to avoid the easy arrogance that comes with being different. To do that, we need to make sure our differences flow out of the gospel.

A great example of urban ministry in the history of our city is Brother Bryan, former pastor of Third Presbyterian. The best book on Brother Bryan is his biography *Religion in Shoes.* It's a bit hagiographic and moralistic, in keeping with the religious biographies of that generation. But it's a fascinating book, especially for those of us who are interested in the history of Birmingham. Brother Bryan was truly a chaplain to the whole city. The quotations on his love for the city are found on p. 29, 186. Here's another great quotation from Bryan, speaking to commission that appointed him City Chaplain (p. 135):

> When God through you appointed me to be a city chaplain, I felt, first, that it was a call straight from God through this great city to me to be faithful to such a trust. I felt, secondly, that God through you gave me an opportunity which he has given to but a few men. I felt, thirdly, as I did when I first came here 42 years ago, the great opportunity in a city, metropolitan in nature, with men and women and children from all the

> ends of the earth. Along with the call, the opportunity, and the privilege came to me the responsibility that God, through you, had rolled on me, that is, of making this city a holier place for men, women, and children to live. This I have tried to do for 42 years and 2 months.

In another place, he wrote (p. 62):

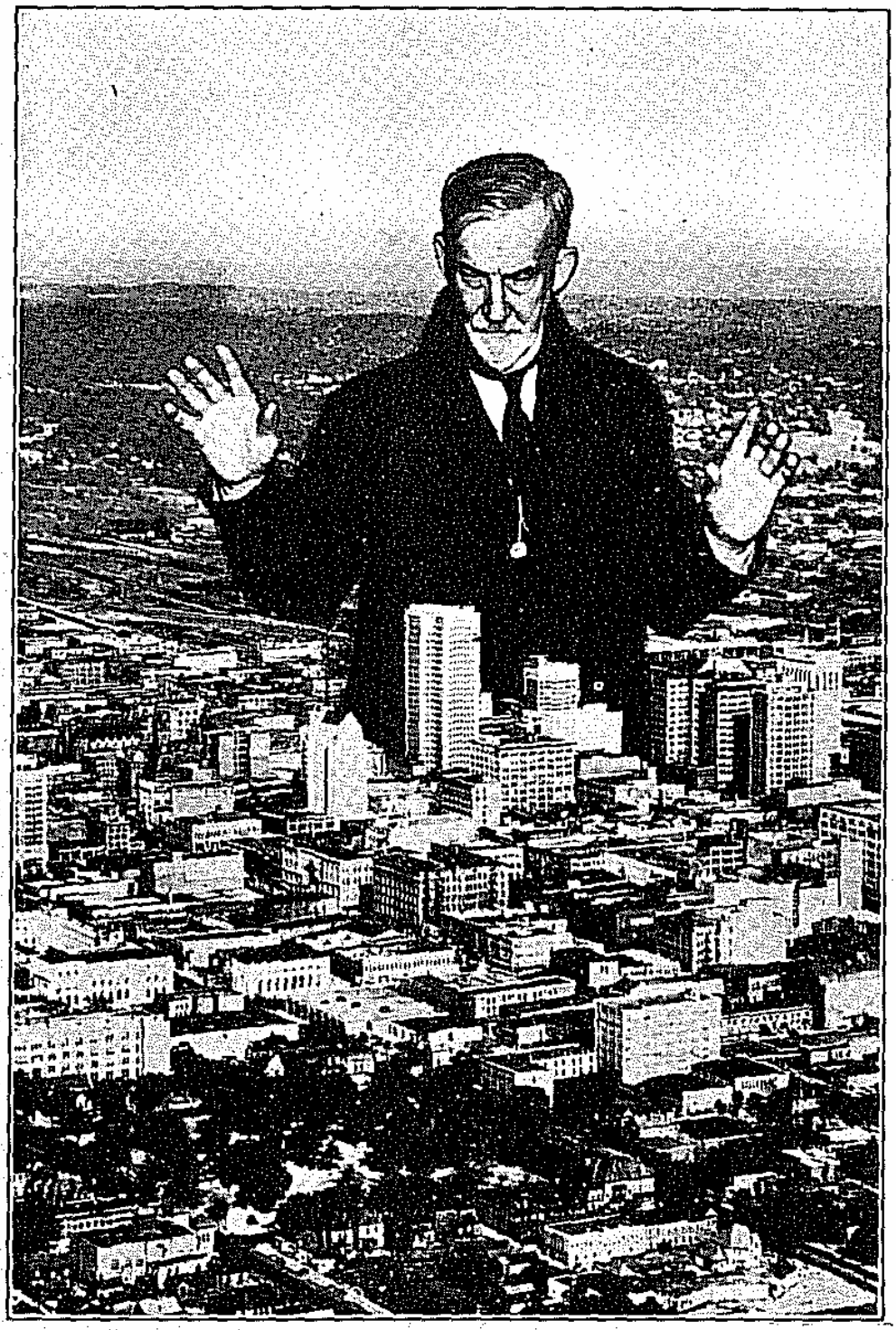
> Next to God's work and his blessing, I believe that Birmingham has taught me that friendship is one of the greates things in life. It is the sweetest, holiest, and most far-reaching agency on earth. Friendship is based upon unselfishness and a desire to help someone – a trust in others more than in self. I accept the love of my friends not as a gift, but as a sacred trust imposed upon me. My friends keep me healthy, sound, and able with their love. They are my eyes with which I see, my ears with which I hear, my mouth with which I speak, my heart with which I love – they are my inspiration.

Obviously, this is a man who understood the importance of community.

Other great anecdotes are found on pages 47f, 97f, and 136f. In the past, I've used Brother Bryan's life to teach on prayer: http://trinity-pres.net/audio/ss06-08-27.mp3

If you can ever find a copy of the book *Religion in Shoes* by Hunter Blakely in a local bookstore, you should definitely pick it up.

Here is an old newspaper picture in the book of Brother Bryan striding through the city, embracing the place he loved most on earth:



Courtesy Birmingham Post

A PREACHER IN A CITY'S LIFE

Brother Bryan shows us what it means for the church to live at the intersection point of theology and geography.

Some background on Birmingham:

First, while I am not a native Birminghamian, I do have roots here. My mom grew up here (she went to Ensley High). I grew up coming here regularly to see family, and I still have a grandmother living in Vestavia. When we lived in Austin, Jenny and I would drive through Birmingham on our way to visit family in the South, and we almost always commented on how much the city must be a great place to live – now we know firsthand! I've always loved Birmingham – it's natural beauty gives it the potential to be a true"garden city" (cf. Rev. 21-22).

Birmingham is a city with a lot of history and a lot of character. I have a lived a lot of places (11 cities/towns in all), including Atlanta, Chicago, and Austin for extended periods of time. I have to confess that Birmingham is my favorite. It's a real gem. It's definitely an underrated city by outsiders. Obviously, we have our problems here, and it's very tempting for suburbanites like me to insulate ourselves from any of the problem parts of the city. But on the whole, this is a place with great people, great natural beauty, and ample cultural opportunities given the size. Of course, the most exciting thing about Birmingham is its potential. The city has not yet come close to realizing what it can be – though I trust someday it will, by the grace of God! I believe TPC is called to be a crucial player in the city's renewal and transformation.

As the largest city in Alabama, and one of the largest cities in the South, Birmingham plays a very important role in our culture. This city is a vital point for the economy, serving as a business and cultural center. What happens here inevitably filters out and trickles down to other places. As the cities go, so the culture goes, so what we do in Birmingham has wide ranging effects for our state and region. Cities generate cultural trends. They bring out the best – and worst – in people. In order to better understand the place of cities in God's program, these articles by (and about) Tim Keller might be helpful:

http://www.e-n.org.uk/p-1869-A-biblical-theology-of-the-city.htm

http://www.christianvisionproject.com/2006/06/a_new_kind_of_urban_christian-print.html

http://thepoint.breakpoint.org/2008/05/tim-keller--gra.html

http://djchuang.googlepages.com/christandthecity

http://www.redeemer2.com/themovement/issues/2004/dec/citychurchplanting.html

One of the most important things we can do is love the place God has put us. Get to know the city's culture, her landmarks, museums, history, and most of all her people. Get to know city leaders if you can. Embrace the city and engage the city with the love of Christ.

On the topic of, What kind of church does this city need?, here are a few further thoughts.

Birmingham's churches that seem most concerned with truth are the ones that seem to be least concerned with beauty. For the sake of the city, we need to ask: What does a *beautiful* church look like? What does beautiful worship look like in this culture? How can we marry the beauty of vintage Christian worship with classical Christian orthodoxy? I think at TPC, we're struggling to answer this question. We don't have it all figured out yet, but we're working on it. Too much of the church's worship has been impoverished because it has been cut off from the work of the Spirit over the last 2000 years. We've become more concerned with contextualization than content (in truth, we need both). Without being afraid to break new ground and work creatively from within the tradition, we need to pay our proper respects to those who have gone before us. For the sake of the city, we need to uphold the beauty of traditional worship forms in the cultural "dark age" that appears to be descending upon us. The tradition has to be developed, matured, glorified, and contemporized – but it must not be annihilated or forgotten.

Birmingham needs churches that cut through stale liberal/conservative debates, not because those issues are now passé (they never will be) but because both sides have gotten off track (and I say that as someone who obviously stands on the conservative side of the tracks). This is a problem with American churches as a whole. The liberal (or so-called mainline) churches tend to condone everything in the culture. Conservative churches tend to condemn everything. Liberal churches identify with the culture, especially with progressive, "cutting edge" movements and trends, largely as a way as maintaining power and status and influence. After all, if you track with the politically correct agenda, with the trends coming out of the Hollywood and media elite, then you can stay

respectable in the world's eyes. You can play chaplain to the culture without ever critiquing the culture, without ever risking rejection. Meanwhile, conservative churches try to play prophet to the culture, critiquing everything in sight. Conservative churches in America have tended to be separatist and sectarian and escapist. They are especially suspicious of cities and city culture. Of course, it's all too easy to despise the city. It's really self-serving because it reinforces all our natural impulses to self-righteousness. It creates a sense of superiority and avoids the suffering and difficult decisions that come with actually trying to engage the city. It's much, much harder to live as "resident aliens." It's much harder to live in the tension that comes from loving the city while refusing to assimilate to it. Living that way got Jesus crucified, after all. Birmingham needs more cruciform churches that love the city enough to suffer for the sake of her transformation. We must love the city as a whole, and not merely look out for our own little group. We must be radically committed to the common good of the city. We can neither mirror the city nor can we despise it. Instead, we must seek its renewal in Christ. Birmingham needs churches of this sort. (See the introduction to Miroslav Volf's "Soft Difference" for more on the problems with both liberal/mainline and conservative/sectarian approaches to culture. 1 Peter is really just a new covenant application of the letter in Jeremiah 29. It is a continuation of the program Daniel began in Nebuchadnezzar's empire.)

As I said in the 2/22 sermon, Birmingham needs churches that do more than evangelize; we need churches that disciple and mature people so they can live for Christ in all of life. There are more Christians in Birmingham proportionally than most other cities, but there is very little to show for it culturally and politically. There is a huge need for Christians to get distinctively Christian vocational training and to ground themselves in a biblical worldview. There is huge need for Christians to get involved in the culture without losing their faith. Perhaps we should seek to form Christian guilds, where believers in particular professions organize and come together for support, training, and encouragement. Perhaps Christian leaders need to come together and discuss ways we can work together for the good of the city's life.

To build on another point, this city needs churches that minister to children in a more covenantal way. Evangelical churches in our city (just like the rest of America) pour millions of dollars into youth programs that, in the end, entertain kids for a few years, but don't really mature them in faith in a way that enables them to face the challenges of a high school and college environment without falling into serious sin (if not falling away from the faith altogether). This city desperately needs churches that pass the faith along from one generation to the

next. We need to be training and equipping parents, we need to make affordable, quality Christian education available to all Christian families, and we need to nurture children in the faith from their earliest days.

Added to that, our city needs churches that bring together inward and outward facing ministries. It does not good to do church in a way that serves the good of our own little body, but never ministers to the broader Birmingham community. Likewise, it does no good to help the homeless in the city if we neglect our children at home, in effect making them homeless. We need to disciple our own members, as well as reach out to the hurting city around us. Most churches in Birmingham seem to emphasize one or the other, but not both together.

Birmingham needs churches that are doctrinally correct without being unnecessarily combative. The curse of the "Bible belt" is that many churches end up with the "luxury" of being able to fight over things that in other less Christian contexts would not be possible. We all too easily identify other Christians as "the enemy." I grew up in public schools in Chicago – I was always happy just to find another faithful Christian, no matter the details of doctrine or denominational affiliation. I was shocked at how much Christians were willing to turn against one another when I got to the South. Birmingham needs churches that can identify the things worth fighting for and the things worth overlooking. Birmingham does not need more churches that "major on the minors" and pretend that "the gospel is at stake" in every little debate. Justo Gonzalez put it well: "The church must be one because a fragmented church is not much help to a fragmented world." Our city desperately needs a unified church. I think one iof the biggest reasons for our ineffectiveness in this city is the fact that we are so divided and cut off from one another. There is great power in unity, if we could only come together.

[By the way, since I keep referring to the "Bible belt," it might be useful to know that Gallup data suggests such a thing really does exist:
http://www.albertmohler.com/blog_read.php?id=3226
Best quote from the article: "In the South, being 'raised right' includes knowing how you are supposed to respond to a question like that posed by Gallup." As I said in the 2/15 sermon, I tend to the think the "Bible belt" phenomenon means that people around us generally have Christian consciences, at least on some major issues, even if they don't truly have Christian hearts.]

The ultimate model for relating to the city is Jesus himself. Jesus loved Jerusalem so much he wept over her. But he also rebuked and threatened the city. Was

Jesus for or against Jerusalem? Both, obviously, in different ways. Likewise, we are called to be a church that is *against the city for the sake of the city*. Our involvement in the city has to be nuanced according to the Word of God. We exist to bless and serve the world, to enhance the city's flourishing socially, economically, and spiritually, through the gospel of Christ. We can't just go with the flow, not can we refuse to enter the flow altogether. We cannot be so withdrawn that we are irrelevant, nor can be so assimilated that we become irrelevant. Our presence should make the city feel both loved and threatened.

What does it mean to be aliens and strangers in the city? Abraham is the original alien in Gen. 23. He's standing in the land promised to him, and yet he does not yet possess any of it. In Lev. 19, the Israelites are told to treat aliens in the promised land with love because God loved them when they were aliens in Egypt. "Alien" is the term the OT uses for outsiders who come and dwell in the land of Israel; they are landless dependents, almost always dwelling in the cities. In the sense of 1 Peter 2:9, to be an alien is to be a resident, without fully fitting in. In a relative sense, Christians are not very alien when the gospel is in the ascendancy, as it was for centuries in the Western world. On the other hand, there is no culture that is so permeated with the gospel that we can fully be at home in it. In some sense, until the resurrection, we will have to live as aliens. No place is really home because we're on our way home (God's new creation). At the same time, every place can be home because every place will ultimately be a part of that new creation.

Whether you are first generation Birmingham resident, or your family has been has been here for 5 generations, there is a deep sense in which you are an alien here. You cannot yet call this culture home because this culture is not yet fully redeemed. At the same time, this is our home because its place God has put us to live as a colony of heaven.

Thus, in the meantime, until the kingdom has completely come, we have to navigate the challenges of belonging to two cultures at once. As one friend of mine put it, we are "bi-cultural." Not the best term, but it does make the point. We are Christians first, Americans/Alabamians/Birminghamians second. We live in the culture of the gospel, but also in the culture of the city. (Paul's opening words in his epistles often reflect this. He addresses Christians as being "in Christ" as well as "in Ephesus.")

Just as we belong to two families, our biological families and the family of Christ, so we belong to two cities, two nations, two kingdoms.

As aliens we can never be given over completely to our host culture. There will always be a distance, a difference (albeit, a “soft difference,” a nuanced difference, according to Miroslav Volf). Since no culture perfectly reflects the gospel, tension is inevitable (just as sin creates tension even in our own hearts).

Miroslav Volf explains what it means to be an alien:

> As Reinhard Feldmeier has argued recently, the key metaphor which 1 Peter employs to express the Christian relationship to culture is the metaphor of "aliens" (paroikos and parepidemos).[5] It takes only a brief glance through the history of the church to see its potency. By the second century being "alien" had become central to the self-under-standing of Christians. Later it was essential to monastic and Anabaptist movements alike, to Augustine and Zinzendorf, and, in our own time, to Dietrich Bonhoeffer (The Cost of Discipleship) no less than to Jim Wallis (Sojourners) or Stanley Hauerwas (Resident Aliens).
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> The metaphor "aliens" had such a powerful influence because it sums up central themes from the OT and expresses some fundamental perspectives from the whole NT about the problem of Christian identity and difference. Abraham was called to go from his country, his kindred, and his father's house (Gen 12:1). His grandchildren and the children of his grandchildren became "aliens in the land of Egypt" (Lev 19:34), and the nation of which he and Sarah were parents lived as exiles in the Babylonian captivity. And even when they were secure in their own land, Yahweh their God demanded of them to be different from surrounding nations.
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> The root of Christian self-understanding as aliens and sojourners lies not so much in the story of Abraham and Sarah and the nation of Israel as it does in the destiny of Jesus Christ, his mission and his rejection which ultimately brought him to the cross. "He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him" (John 1:11). He was a stranger to the world because the world into which he came was estranged from God. And so it is with his followers. "When a person becomes a believer, then he (or she) moves from the far country to the vicinity of God…. There now arises a relation of reciprocal foreignness and estrangement between Christians and the world."[6]Christians are born of the Spirit (John 3:8) and are therefore not "from the world" but, like Jesus Christ, "from God" (John 15:19).

> There is no need here to give a detailed analysis of the trajectory from Abraham and the people of Israel to Jesus Christ and his church. It will suffice to take a careful look at the metaphor "aliens" in 1 Peter. Yet to understand the metaphor, an analysis of the terms paroikos and parepidemos, say of an etymological or even sociological kind, will not do. In 1 Peter these terms mean not more and not less than what the epistle as a whole teaches about the relation of Christians to the surrounding culture. To unpack "aliens" we need to broaden our vision and look at what the epistle as a whole says about the nature of Christian presence in a given culture.
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> On the matter of Christians living in a non-Christian environment 1 Peter is not simply one little voice among other NT voices. Though the epistle is marginal within the NT as a whole, it pulls together "essential social-ethical traditions"of the NT as a whole.[7] A careful reader will, however, discover in 1 Peter not only a "compiler," but a creative thinker in his own right, capable of integrating the social features which Troeltsch tells us we should find clearly separated and assigned to different social types of religious communities.

Our identity is ecclesially constructed:

> Talk about "new birth" could suggest a purely individual process of distancing from the culture-a soul takes flight from the world, and seeks refuge with the etemal God, and becomes a stranger to the world of sin and death in that it migrates (metoikizo) into its undefiled and imperishable inheritance (1:4)[16] In a modern version of such individualistic faith a person would not depart from the world but would, like Sheila Larson in Habits of the Heart, says, "I believe in God.... My faith has carried me a long way. It's Sheilaism. Just my own little voice."[17] If this were what was meant by "new birth," Christian difference would be strictly private; gnosticism and mysticism would thrive under the name-brand "Christianity." Does the text of 1 Peter support such understandings of new birth, however?
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> The new birth "of the imperishable seed, through the living and enduring word of God" (1:23) is not simply an internal and private event. Think of its inextricable connection with baptism. Some exegetes surmise that the whole epistle is a baptismal liturgy.[18] Be that as it may, a connection

between new birth and baptism is undeniable-a fact with momentous consequences. No one can baptize himself or herself; everyone must be baptized by another person into a given Christian community. Baptism is an incorporation into the body of Christ, a doorway into a Christian community. Baptism will not do the distancing for you, but it will tell you that genuine Christian distance has ecclesial shape. It is lived in a community that lives as "aliens" in a larger social environment.

The new birth is neither a conversion to our authentic inner self nor a migration (metoikesia) of the soul into a heavenly realm, but a translation of a person into the house of God (oikos tou theou) erected in the midst of the world. It comes as no surprise, then, to find in 1 Peter that OT collective designations for the people of God are applied to the Christian church: "But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people" (2:9). The distance from the social environment in 1 Peter is not simply eschatological; it is also essentially ecclesiological.[19] Its correlate is the eschatological people of God, who live in the world hoping for God's new creation, not "our own authentic little voice" nor some "heavenly home" separated from this world by an unbridgeable gulf.

Correspondingly, one must understand the "walk" (anastrophe) of Christians which 1 Peter so strongly emphasizes (1:15, 17, 18; 2:12; 3:1, 2, 16) not as private morality instructing how to purify the soul from an evil world nor how to "love yourself and be gentle with yourself. . . take care of each other,"[20] but as an ecclesial way of being that is distinct from the way of being of the society at large. "Walk" is the way the Christian community lives in the world. Wherever Christians find themselves-alone or with other believers-a Christian social difference is manifested there. Communities of those who are born anew and follow Christ live an alternative way of life within the political, ethnic, religious, and cultural institutions of the larger society.

We get no sense from 1 Peter, however, that the church should strive to regulate all domains of social life and reshape society in the image of the heavenly Jerusalem. One could argue, of course, that it would be anachronistic to expect such a thought even to occur in the Petrine community. Were they not discriminated against, a minority living in premodern times? Does that invalidate or compromise their stance, however? Why would it? Whatever the reason, the Petrine community was no aggressive sect in the sense of Ernst Troeltsch. It did not wish to

> impose itself or the kingdom of God on the world, but to live in faithfulness to God and to the values of God's kingdom, inviting others to do the same. It had no desire to do for others what they did not want done for them. They had no covert totalitarian agenda. Rather, the community was to live an alternative way of life in the present social setting, transforming it, as it could, from within. In any case, the community did not seek to exert social or political pressure, but to give public witness to a new way of life.

My one gripe with Volf is that he seems to think the church's status as counter-culture is incompatible with the church's role as the transformer of culture. I would actually say these must go together, biblically and historically. Insofar as the church believes the gospel of Christ's lordship to be public truth for the whole world, she cannot be indifferent to cultural change. The church certainly does not violently impose her convictions on an unwilling world (Volf has that right), but she most certainly works for the renewal and transformation of the culture.

The relationship between the church and the city is dynamic, fluid, and complex. There is a set pattern of responses from the world. In fact, in 1 Peter, we see interaction between the church and the surrounding pagan culture to be deeply multifaceted. Miroslav Volf captures these complexities in 1 Peter well (highlighting mine):

> One is immediately struck in 1 Peter with two contrary reactions of outsiders to the soft missionary difference. On the one hand, there is angered surprise and blaspheming from non-Christians that Christians are no longer joining them "in the same excesses of dissipation" (4:4). The Christian difference is the cause of discrimination and persecution. Moreover, 1 Peter tells us, such negative reaction is to be expected from non-Christians. Christians should not be surprised by the "fiery ordeal" which they have to endure (4:12). The negative reactions of non-Christians do not rest on misunderstanding, but are rooted in the inner logic of the non-Christian constellation of values which seem incompatible with the values of Christians. On the other hand, one of the central passages in 1 Peter entertains a lively hope that precisely the Christian difference-outwardly visible in their good deeds-will cause non-Christians to see the truth and eventually convert (2:12,15; 3:1; 3:16). This expectation presupposes overlap between Christian and non-Christian constellations of values. The good works of Christians can be appreciated by non-

Christians and look attractive to them.

Commensurability and incommensurability between Christian and non-Christian value patterns are so intertwined in 1 Peter that they can appear in one and the same sentence: "Conduct yourself honorably among the Gentiles, so that, through that for which they malign you as evildoers, they may see your honorable deeds and glorify God when he comes to judge" (2:11). The very actions which the Gentiles malign as evil deeds, will ultimately be recognized by them as good deeds if Christians do consistently what non-Christians malign. Non-Christians will even convert on account of these good deeds. Two seemingly contradictory reactions exist side by side! Can one reconcile them?

One way to resolve the problem is to invoke the miracle of seeing. Non-Christians look at the same phenomenon, but they are no longer provoked to anger because they come to it from a different perspective-the perspective of faith. Yet the miracle of seeing can happen only when one has already come to faith.[46] Consequently, coming to faith would not be the result of observing good works, but perceiving good works would be the result of coming to faith. Moreover, the presupposition of this solution is that value patterns of Christians and non-Christians are incommensurable. There are no bridges or overlaps. The only thing one can do is jump from one value system into another for no apparent reason or, possibly, out of dissatisfaction. But what is significant in 1 Peter is that commensurability and incommensurability are taking place at one and the same time, that good works themselves are both the cause of blaspheming (4:4) and the cause for glorifying God (2:12).[47] How is this possible?

The stress on Christian difference notwithstanding, the "world" does not seem a monolithic place in 1 Peter. We encounter evil people who persecute Christians and who will continue to do the same, blaspheming what is most holy to Christians (4:4,12). We come across ignorant and foolish people who will be silenced by Christian good behavior (2:15). We meet people who know what is wrong and what is right and are ready to relate to Christians accordingly (2:14). Finally, we encounter people who see, appreciate, and are finally won over to the Christian faith (2:12; 3:1).[48] Thus, the picture is more complex than just the two extreme and contrary reactions. This testifies to a sensitivity in 1 Peter for the complexity of the social environment.

Let me try to explicate the implicit understanding of the social world. The world consists of a plurality of "worlds." The values of these worlds do not form tight and comprehensive systems; they are not like balls that touch but do not connect. Rather, each of these worlds consists of a mixture of partly self-consistent and partly disparate practices and thought patterns. In addition, the worlds are in a permanent social interchange which shapes values that are partly common to the interacting social worlds, partly merely compatible, and partly contrary. An essential dimension of the interchange is the struggle for social power. In this struggle, ethical persuasions and various interests collide, not only between various parties, but also within one party or even within a single person. Jean-Françcois Lyotard paints a similar picture when he writes:

The social subject itself seems to dissolve in this dissemination of language games. The social bond is linguistic, but is not woven with a single thread. It is a fabric formed by the intersection of at least two (and in reality an indeterminate number) of language games, obeying different rules.[49]

If we do not take too seriously the talk about the dissolution of the subject.[50] Lyotard's description of the complex social interaction seems right on target.

Notice the consequences of such a picture of the social world for the question of commensurability between value systems of discrete social groups (such as a Christian church). In such a world, one cannot speak either of the principled commensurability or of the principled incommensurability of value systems. Of course, one can imagine situations in which value systems of communities are fully commensurable or are completely incommensurable. But this is theory, not reality. As a rule, however, they are partly commensurable and partly incommensurable. They can even be commensurable and incommensurable at the same time, insofar as the values within one community or within one single person can be contradictory. Thus when we find commensurability and incommensurability at one and the same time in 1 Peter, we should not be too quick to accuse 1 Peter of inconsistency, but rather ask whether our urge for consistency does not skew our perception of social reality. The epistle shows remarkable and refreshing sensibility for the complexity of social realities, bursting a black and white way of thinking.

In addition to explaining the different ways in which non-Christians relate to the gospel, the complex interplay of commensurability and incommensurability suggests also that there is no single proper way for Christians to relate to a given culture as a whole. Instead, there are numerous ways of accepting, rejecting, subverting or transforming various aspects of a culture which itself is a complex pattem of symbols, beliefs, values, practices and organizations that are partly congruent with one another and partly contradictory. It seems obvious, but is in no way trite, to note that 1 Peter does not speak abstractly about the relation between gospel and culture. Much like other NT writings, the epistle does not deal explicitly with "culture" as the place of Christian presence, nor with "society" as a field of Christian responsibility.[51] But it does provide some overarching perspectives about how particular Christians in Asia Minor at a particular time should relate to their diverse neighbors. **Even if we find abstractions necessary and models of relating to a culture useful, we should not lose sight of the rich diversity within any given culture and therefore of the multiple ways in which the gospel relates to it, such as being "against the culture" and "converting the culture," "subverting the culture" and in some sense being even "of the culture"- all at the same time…**

After the foregoing exegetical and theological analysis of Christian identity and difference in 1 Peter, let us revisit in our conclusion the church-sect typology and ask about the nature of the Petrine community as it is portrayed in 1 Peter. It seems that, through the new birth into a living hope, a "sect" was born. And indeed, before the newborn child could take her first breath, her difference, her foreignness, was manifest. As she was growing up, there was no question that she did not quite fit into her environment.

Soon, however, she began to confuse observers by provoking uncertainty about her sectarian identity. **It looked as if she did not forge her identity through rejection of her social environment, but through the acceptance of God's gift of salvation and its values. She refused to operate within the alternative "affirmation of the world" versus "denial of the world," but surprised people with strange combinations of difference and acculturation. She was sure of her mission to proclaim the mighty deeds of God for the salvation of the world, but refused to use either pressure or manipulation. Rather, she lived fearlessly her soft difference. She was not surprised by the various reactions of individuals and**

> **communities among whom she lived because she was aware of the bewildering complexity of social worlds in which values are partly the same, partly different, sometimes complementary, and sometimes contradictory. And so it gradually became clear that the child who was born again through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead into a living hope was not a sect at all.** The unusual child who looked like a sect, but did not act like a sect, was a Christian community-a church that can serve as a model even for us today as we reflect on the nature of Christian presence in modern, rapidly changing, pluralistic societies that resist being shaped by moral norms.

To say we are aliens make some people think of space invaders, or Martians. Maybe that's not altogether off-base. After all, we are a colony of heaven, planted by god on the earth. Our kingdom is not of this world. We are born from above. Our true citizenship is in heaven. As Paul says, the Jerusalem above is our mother and our city.

Given that we are different, there is always going to be distance between the church and the world. The key is how we fill that distance. Do we love across the gap, bringing the gospel to the world and the world to the gospel? Or do use that distance as a way of expressing hatred and contempt for the world? Our mission is bridge the gap with the gospel.

This is what it means to be aliens without being alienated or being alienating.

On being aliens and strangers here, Rich Mullin's song, "Land of my Sojourn" puts this theology into musical form.

CHURCH AS COMMUNITY:

God likes other people – existing eternally as the Trinity, how could it be otherwise. But this means we must like other people too. Each one of us is to be "people person." Now, I will grant there are different personality types and I'm not denying that people will relate to others in a variety of ways. Some people thrive off of interpersonal interaction, others get drained and have to back away. That's fine. But we all have to be "into" community. We all must be committed to getting to know others in the church and letting them get to know us.

To live in community means we share with one another. We open our lives to one another. We work together on showing hospitality to outsiders who come into the presence of our community, with the goal of making them part of our community as well. Hospitality is an incredibly important practice in the Bible for both strengthening and extending community. Especially for us, as an *odd* liturgical church that does some weird things (judged by contemporary evangelical standards – though perfectly normal if judged by the historic church!), hospitality is even more important for us than it is for other churches. The degree to which a church is liturgically strange is the degree to which she must be radically committed welcoming outsiders. I think we do this well, though we can always do better. At Redeemer in Austin, we joked that we were the church where, "Ancient liturgy meets west Texas charm." I've thought a good tongue-in-cheek slogan for us might be: "Trinity Church – where Southern hospitality meets vintage Christian worship." A strong inner community is a major ingredient in what it takes to welcome outsiders, and we want to do that. The city needs it. Here is how I have described it in the past;

> Frankly, against the backdrop of the Birmingham church scene, we do a pretty good job living out the *oddness* Flannery O' Connor calls us to ("You shall know the truth and the truth shall make you odd!"). But that oddness means we have to be significantly friendlier than the average church to get people to understand who we are and buy into it. The degree to which your church does not conform to American pop culture is directly proportional to how much harder you have to work to draw people in. Or to put it another way, weird churches like TPC have to overcome that weirdness by being so attractive in other ways that people stay around long enough to get used to the weirdness.

Non-Christians, generally speaking, think that Christians hate them. By creating a loving and welcoming community, we can show them that is not the case. We can over come their (often understandable) prejudices, and create space for the gospel to get a fair hearing.

Here's a pastor helpfully explaining how communal hospitality can serve the mission of the church:

> Turn to 1 Peter 4:10. We could go to a number of places in the Bible that speak of our various gifts in the work of mission, but let's stay in 1 Peter.

Each one should use whatever gift he has received to serve others, faithfully administering God's grace in its various forms. [11] If anyone speaks, he should do it as one speaking the very words of God. If anyone serves, he should do it with the strength God provides, so that in all things [by all people] God may be praised through Jesus Christ. To him be the glory and the power for ever and ever. Amen.

Now there are many more gifts listed in the New Testament but here are two broad categories – speakers and servers. And the word used for service is a word really associated with serving at tables, hospitality gifts – gifts of opening up your table and opening up your home to others.

And Peter says there will be differently gifted people. I don't mind speaking in front of people, I'm comfortable with that. But my culinary skills involve a microwave and the defrost setting and that's it. Other people hat speaking in public and would rather have their eye-lids caught in industrial machinery, but they serve. Now I'm not let off the serving hook, just cos I'm a speaker – there are still many ways I must serve. And a server is not let off the hook in speaking of Christ either – there are still ways in which the server needs to put words to their gospel hope – we'll see that. But what Peter is pointing towards is the church working together as a priestly people – bringing Christ to the world.

And this mix of servers and speakers is such a brilliant evangelistic combination. Can you imagine what Peter is suggesting here: some people are great at hosting other people and welcoming them in, serving them. As these people open out their homes and their tables to friends and neighbours, imagine if, liberally sprinkled around the place you invited Christians who were particularly gifted at talking about Christ? What would you have then? You'd have the way Jesus and the early church did mission – that's what you'd have.

Think for instance of Levi, remember the story of his conversion in Luke 5? He was a tax collector and the day he follows Christ – a very recent convert – he opens out his home to all his non-Christian work colleagues. And he invites Jesus and the disciples around and they have, what is basically, an evangelistic dinner party. That's absolutely typical of the way Jesus did mission. (He'd generally be the speaker, it would always be someone else's place and you can rely on someone like Martha to do the catering – that was so much of Jesus' ministry.)

> And it wasn't just about one-off evangelistic dinner parties. For Jesus and the early church it was a way of life. The church together, speakers and servers, being a priestly body to the world. That's what Peter envisions.
>
> Do you realise you have entered the priesthood? What are your gifts? How can we use them in a priestly, witnessing way?

John Stott does a nice job explaining the importance of the church and church community in a smattering of quotations:

> The Christian life is not just our own private affair. If we have been born again into God's family, not only has he become our Father but every other Christian believer in the world, whatever his nation or denomination, has become our brother or sister in Christ.
>
> But it is no good supposing that membership of the universal Church of Christ is enough; we must belong to some local branch of it. … Every Christian's place is in a local church. … sharing in its worship, its fellowship, and its witness….
>
> As the gospel spreads throughout the world, this new and variegated Christian community develops. It is as if a great drama is being enacted. History is the theatre, the world is the stage, and church members in every land are the actors. God himself has written the play, and he directs and produces it. Act by act, scene by scene, the story continues to unfold. But who are the audience? They are the cosmic intelligences, the principalities and powers in the heavenly places [Eph. 3:10]. We are to think of them as spectators of the drama of salvation. Thus 'the history of the Christian church becomes a graduate school for angels.'

Lesslie Newbigin explains how the church models the way God designed human life to work:

> I believe that the Christian view of God's purposes for the human family is different from both [capitalism and socialism]… and arises from a distinct belief about what human nature is. From its first page to its last, the Bible is informed by a vision of human nature for which neither freedom nor equality is fundamental; what is fundamental is relatedness. Man – male and female – is made for God in such a way that being in the

> image of God involves being bound together in this most profound of all mutual relationships. God binds himself in a covenant relationship with men and women to which he remains faithful at whatever cost and however unfaithful his covenant partner is. And people and nations are called to live in binding covenant relationships of brotherhood. Human beings reach their true end in such relatedness, in bonds of mutual love and obedience that reflect the mutual relatedness in love that is the being of the Triune God himself. Neither *freedom* nor *equality* are words that can take us to the heart of the matter.

If we reach our true end in relatedness, then we reach our true end in the community of the church.

Our calling as Christians is not just to truth. It is to turn that truth into a particular set of relationships and practices. We cannot be content with abstractions. We must embody what we believe in concrete ways.

The living stones metaphor is definitely Trinitarian. The stones are diverse and yet one. The unity-in-diversity that we see in the church should be a living embodiment of the Trinity. The diversity means the church is not a typical affinity group, or club, based on common interests or whatnot. The community of the church is built by god himself. We need to be careful complaining about people in the church because to do so is to gripe against God's skills as a master architect and builder.

Here are some more thoughts on community—

Martin Luther, describing how we live in and for one another through Christ:

> We conclude, therefore, that a Christian lives not in himself, but in Christ and in his neighbor. Otherwise he is not a Christian. He lives in Christ through faith, in his neighbor through love. By faith he is caught up beyond himself into God. By love he descends beneath himself into his neighbor.

David DeSilva on creed, baptism, and ecclesial identity:

> When we were baptized, we became part of the larger story of a community of faith, a story passed on in summary form in the Nicene Creed. This creed gives us our foundational story line, which in turn gives

> us our identity, our sense of direction and our orientation to the world - if we allow it! Like the confession of sin, the creed uses *we* forms. It is an affirmation of our commitment to a story that we received from a community of faith that has struggled to live in line with this story across the millennia. Ours is not a private faith, nor is the story one that we are free to alter to suit our liking. Indeed, the Nicene Creed exists largely as a result of the church's working out the nonnegotiable contours of the story of God's interventions in God's world in response to some independent thinkers - who would come to be known as "heretics" - whose innovations were viewed as unhelpful tampering with that story. The early church leaders who wrestled with the formulation of the creed did so not only out of a desire to get the story and the characters straight. They also did so out of a knowledge that the story we tell about God is the starting point for living out our lives before him and in line with him.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, in his great work, *Life Together*, on community:

> I have community with others and I shall continue to have it only through Jesus Christ. The more genuine and the deeper our community becomes, the more will everything else between us recede, the more clearly and purely will Jesus Christ and his work become the one and only thing that is vital between us. We have one another only through Christ, but through Christ we do have one another, wholly, and for all eternity….
>
> ...let him who until now has had the privilege of living in a common life with other Christians praise God's grace from the bottom of his heart. Let him thank God on his knees and declare: It is grace, nothing but grace, that we are allowed to live in community with Christian brethren.

Tod Bolsinger uses American Idol to explain why we need community:

> One of the most interesting moments in the early "audition" episodes of American Idol is when one of the contestants has been so bad, that the judges are actually left speechless. They would critique or offer comment, or even just simply dismiss the off-key warbler, but they just sit there incredulously wondering what this person must be thinking to go through the trouble of standing in line for hours, singing for different producers and now, being put on the air for the express purpose of looking ridiculous.

Now, according to past participants, *American Idol* tells all contestants that only the very best AND the very worst will be put on television. And so, as the singer finishes an ear piercing *a cappella* rendition of a favorite song, it dawns on the judges that this singer…***actually thinks he is really good.*** And so, instead of making a statement, one of them asks a question, "So, what usually happens when you sing?" Or "How is your singing usually received?" And the answer, nearly every time is, "People love it. Everybody thinks I am great. All my friends think I am going to be a big star."

And one look at their shocked and dismayed faces when the judges reject them makes it clear that they have either been lied to by too many or have been deluding themselves all along.

Now, of course, how much of their lives to this point have been self-delusion or grandiose collusion is hard to figure, but it does lead to my American Idol observation #2:

Most of us need to spend more time observing our impact.

Many of us rarely, if ever, pay attention to the actual effect that we have on those around us.

We *intend* to be encouraging to our children, but they *actually* experience us as being harsh and critical.

We *think* we are being sensitive, but our loved ones cower around us.

We *believe* that we are people of good humor, good graces, winning personalities and our charming conversationalists, but we leave people bored and distracted.

We *think* that we are good listeners but we haven't even noticed that the person across the table hasn't said anything for the last 20 minutes.

One of my mentors likes to say that while most of us judge ourselves by our <u>intentions</u> Others judge us by our <u>impact.</u> And no matter what our intentions may be (how many American Idol contestants have said, "I was just trying to have fun out there."), we are judged, whether in singing or in any other endeavor, on the actual impact or effect we have on others.

More of us need someone in our life to hold up a mirror and show us what we actually look like, help us get beyond what we intend to do and show us instead the actual impact of our lives.

Doug Wilson on parish bonds:

In his lectures, George Grant has recently been highlighting the remarkable work of Thomas Chalmers, the great Scottish theologian and

preacher of the last century. At the center of that work was the concept of "parish."

We frequently start our discussions at the wrong end. Say for example that we bring up the issue of the relation of the Church to the world. In doing this, we think first about the whole Church and the abstract world. We rarely bring our thoughts down to the level of particular congregations and particular communities surrounding them. The result of this mistake is that we find ourselves trafficking in abstractions.

The church is not the parish, and the parish is not the church. At the same time, the church thrives at the center of the parish, informing and discipling those who live their lives in the parish. Life in the church involves word and sacraments while life in the parish involves auto mechanics, farming, retail shops, schools, along with all the other stuff men and women do.

But the denominational system, as it has developed in America, has greatly undermined our capacity even to think in terms of parish, which in turn means that we have lost even the *concept* of true community. The closest approximation we have of it is found in good churches where the members of the congregation worship together, love each other, and share the occasional potluck. This is good as far as it goes, but it must be acknowledged in all honesty that it does not go very far. We have truncated our churches, and have detached them from the soil. We will drive by thirty churches in order to attend the one we like. Whatever advantages this has (and there are some), it still means that churches are selected in a way that is inconsistent with the formation of true community. In an average town of modest size, the Christians in that town will arise on the Lord's Day, and then as they make their way in scores of different directions to multiple churches, they perform an ecclesiastical version of a Chinese fire drill. Perhaps such expressions are too insensitive to be legal anymore, but if so, the crackerjack legal team at Ligonier will certainly take it out.

But in the older parish system, the members of the congregation would certainly worship together on the Lord's Day, just as we do. But for the rest of the week, they would labor together in the fields, fish together on the seas, work in the same shops, go to war together in the same regiment. Their lives were intertwined -- but their intertwined lives were also *ordered*. They had a hierarchy of values, and the centerpiece of their lives was the worship of God.

All this affects how we think about the Great Commission. Too often we are too quick to dash off to an evangelistic field which is exciting, fruitful,

distant. How many churches think seriously of their duty to fulfill the Great Commission in their *neighborhood*? And even when we think "locally," it is too easy to think about establishing a "ministry" in a town with a sufficient population to provide the new church with its "market share." Thus we are selective in our local ministry. In order for this system to work we cater to our market niche. The church functions on exactly the same principles as a new department store. This also mitigates against true community. Community will never arise from groups with "special interests," whether those interests include ham radio, square dancing, or the five points of Calvinism.

The problem is deep and systemic, and there are no quick fixes. But one place to begin is to think seriously about where we live. At least two criteria should be considered -- living near the church, and living near one another. Christians should love one another, not just on the Lord's Day, and loving one another involves wanting to be together. This involves wanting to create opportunities for our children to play together, for our men to work together in various "barn raising" tasks, for the women to be involved in one another's lives on a daily basis.

Before all this is dismissed as an agrarian utopia, unfit for the demands of modern city living, it should be noted that Thomas Chalmers was successful in establishing coherent parish communities in urban centers. The issues here do not concern what is possible, but rather what we want. For all our longing for "community," when it comes down to the point, we sometimes discover that we love our loneliness.

To whatever extent we decide to pursue the parish ideal, the modern world knows how to defend itself. When people start loving one another, and seeking to live close to one another, they clearly belong to a "cult," and will probably end up drinking funny-tasting Kool Aid. A cult mentality is "obviously" exhibited by anyone who does not want to live in the prescribed atomistic and detached way -- just another ball bearing rattling around in modernity's machine. The contemporary standards will beckon with a siren call -- any kind of weirdness is accepted by us, as long as it is not the weirdness of normality and sanity. But it is time for Christians to think about turning away.

The modern world is a big place, and will not be transformed in any fifteen minute processes. But if we are thinking about our grandchildren, a good place to start our thoughts is with the idea of parish.

Wilson on living with actual people:

Learning to live in genuine community is one of the central goals that we have set for ourselves. And, to be honest, we did not set the goal—it is set before us in Scripture as one of the basic elements of the Christian faith. We are one in Jesus Christ, and this is not to be limited to Sunday morning when everyone is wearing their best clothes, when pretty much everyone took a shower, and everyone is on their best behavior. This is the place where we are woven into community, but the thing is not supposed to come unraveled as we are pulling out of the parking lot.

But community on Monday morning . . . that's another thing. And Thursday afternoon can be even more difficult. Because living in community is what takes the rough edges off, but before it takes the rough edges off, living in community reveals those rough edges. Some of you are regularly late to things. Some of you don't return things that you have borrowed in a timely way. Some of you think that community means other people baby-sitting for you. Some of you think that community means having a right to be a grouch. Some of you think that community means flirting with all the sisters, or with all the brothers as the case may be. Community brings all this out, but community, over time, is also supposed to *deal* with it.

We are tangled up in one another's lives, and this is as it ought to be. But we are not tangled up so that we would surrender to various forms of thoughtlessness. Confronting this kind of thing as appropriate, covering it in love as appropriate, is the training ground that God has given to us. We are a rag tag collection of forgiven sinners, and a number of us have some messy things lying about in our lives. The task before us is to pick up, and to help one another do so *in all patience*.

So patience does not mean leaving it alone. Addressing it firmly does not mean impatience. And learning how to do this is one of God's great gifts to us.

CHURCH AS MISSION:

Community and mission go together as the inward and outward facing aspects of the church. Every healthy church will be stretched in both directions at once, all the time. If the church is our community, the world is our mission field. Just as Jesus is the new Solomon and Chief Builder of the church as our community, so he is also the Ultimate Missionary. Jesus lived a missionary life from the beginning, drawing the nations to himself, even in his infancy (Matt. 2). If Jesus

existed as a missional being, we are missional beings in him as well. He engaged in missionary activity, and we must as well. Our salvation is inseparable from our sentness, from our participation in mission. We are saved to be sent. We have our life in mission, and without mission, our rationale for existing as the church dissolves.

We are called to live a missionary life. That means using all we have for the good of the kingdom. Ask: How do I use my wallet for the sake of the kingdom? My house? My car? How is my life different because I'm Christian, because I have this mission? It is impossible to be a Christian without witnessing, without serving, without suffering, without doing the mission.

What does mission look like? It looks like Christ. Christ brought us to God (cf. 1 Peter 3:18), and now we're to bring others to God. More specifically, the mission looks like Christ crucified. Mission is cruciform, and the cross is the heart and shape of mission. Mission is a matter of learning to pour our lives out for the sake of others, giving ourselves to and for them. We do not minister "at" people, but "towards" and "for" them, in a way that brings them into alignment with god's gracious purposes for the creation.

This kind of life is not supposed to be easy. We live in the middle of the same tension within which Jesus lived. On the one hand, we are chosen by God, and precious in his sight. We are commissioned to carry his love into the world. On the other hand, we are hated by the world. We very people we want to serve despise everything we stand for. The only way to make the mission work is to be willing to suffer, and to seek to melt away their resistance through our truth, goodness, and beauty.

Of course, to do mission, we must understand Christ's mission on our behalf. Otherwise, the mission is going to be motivated by pride or fear. Only when we are motivated by love and grace can we sustain the mission through the kids of opposition, setback, and heartbreak we are sure to endure.

As I said 2/15, mission flows out of the Trinity. God is Sender, Sent, and Message. The mission is first and foremost a movement from heaven to earth. The whole church now is missional (or, apostolic, as the creed puts it) in character. We are the sent people of God. We are running God's errand in the world. Mission is not a professional skill for a few called, super-Christians. It belongs to the whole church.

O pointed out 2/15 that early Christian usage of *missio* terminology was rooted in the Trinity (the Father "missioning" the Son) and the liturgy (the final words of the liturgy were, "you are sent!"). The latter of these we try to preserve and echo with our final hymn, call a hymn of disMISSAL. It is a "sending out" hymn.

In order to carry out the mission with humility and winsomeness, we have to remember that we are no better (left to ourselves) than those we are trying to reach. And even as God's redeemed people we still do the very things we so want to condemn in others. We do to others the same kinds of wrongs that are done to us. As Alexander Solzhenitsyn pointed out, the line between good and evil not only runs through the world, it runs through our hearts. We need to approach outsiders with humility, not because we do not have answers (after all, we do!), but because "but for the grace of God…" We can never help others in a condescending, paternalistic kind of way, as if we were saying, "Those people out there have problems, we've got answers. I'm glad we're not like them. I'm glad we can tell them what they need to do." In truth, even though we do have solutions, so long as we still sin, we are part of the problem too, and must not be arrogant.

This is why Peter calls on us to fight fleshly lusts that war against our souls (2:11-12). We are on the way, but we have not yet arrived at the goal. Peter is saying that sinful inclinations still grip our hearts and lead us astray. We are in the midst of a battle against sin. Peter never tells us to reject the world, flat out; instead, he focuses on the battle within the hearts of believers. Sin is not just a problem "out there," it's a problem "in here." We cannot win the world unless we are winning this battle in our own lives. The mission in the world will fail unless we win the war in our own hearts.

But Peter's focus on the Christian's heart battle is instructive. The way to holiness is not pushing the world away, but fighting sin in our own hearts. The enemy is within; knowing that frees us up to minister to those around us.

We must learn to see the breadth of God's mission. I think one problem folks still have (I'm including TPC in this) is thinking of "mission" in too narrow a way. It's not just evangelism; it's comprehensive blessing/*shalom* for the world. In the same way, the Great Commission (Matt. 28) is not just about "saving souls" but "discipling nations." Why should we be talking about mission in Birmingham, AL, the most churched big city in the US? Because this city, for all its churches and all its Christians, is still far from being disciplined. The mission is not yet finished. We still have work to do. We cannot yet say, "mission accomplished."

Birmingham still looks more like the city of man than the city of God. No one will confuse the "magic city" with the New Jerusalem!!

Thus, mission, pushes us out, but not just to "do evangelism" in the way Bible-belt Christians think of it, but also to make our daily vocations link up with the kingdom of God as we seek the common good and seek to participate in the *missio Dei*. We're to obey everything Jesus commanded -- and to teach others to do the same. That makes the scope of the mission as wide as life itself. The question, Are we being the kind of church this city needs us to be?, can be personalized into, Am I the kind of school teacher/salesman/doctor/coach/businessman/homemaker/etc. this city needs me to be? Is this city any better off because we're here? How can we bless Cahaba Heights once we move there? Are we a blessing to our city right now? Is the city more beautiful because of our presence? How are we blessing our neighborhoods, streets, and the folks next door?

Dualism abstracts the sacred from the rest of life, and privatizes it. It is a way of avoiding conflict and respectability because it allows one to blend in the public life. In our culture, dualism and privatization stem from the Kantian Enlightenment, and behind that, certain forms of Greek philosophy that denigrated the material world. Kant argued that religious morals are merely personal values that cannot be publicly established or validated. Thus they can never be more than a privatized system of ethics, and must never intrude into business or politics. Public morals must be governed by reason. Over against this dualism, a missional understanding of the church demands worldview-ish Christianity. For an excellent exposition of this, see Albert Wolters' *Creation Regained.*

As I said 2/22, mission includes helping the poor. It is both word and deed ministry in Christ's name. Doing good is costly and difficult because you cannot relieve another's burdens without bearing them yourself. To help a suffering person is to take suffering onto yourself. But it's necessary for us to help the poor in this way because such ministry flows out of the logic and pattern of the gospel. It is critical for us to learn to be like Jesus, in showing compassion to confused and broken people.

Mission is cruciform. It starts with the fact that Jesus did good to us. How? Keller explains, drawing from 2 Cor. 8-9:

> When Paul asks for financial generosity to the poor, he points to the self-emptying of Jesus, vividly depicting him as becoming poor for us, both literally and spiritually, in the incarnation and on the cross. For Edwards, Paul's little introduction "I am not commanding you . . . for you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ" is significant. The argument seems to be that if you grasp substitutionary atonement in both your head and your heart, you will be profoundly generous to the poor. Think it out! The only way for Jesus to get us out of our spiritual poverty and into spiritual riches was to get out of his spiritual riches into spiritual poverty. This should now be the pattern of your life. Give your resources away and enter into need so that those in need will be resourced. Paul also implies here that all sinners saved by grace will look at the poor of this world and feel that in some way they are looking in the mirror. The superiority will be gone.

Jonathan Edwards called charity "the rule of the gospel." If we get the gospel, we get the rational for mercy. A gospel-shaped, gospel-driven concern for the poor is a critical dimension of the church's mission. We can't just preach people into the kingdom, we have to love them into the kingdom. We must do for others in a metaphorical way what Jesus has done for us in a literal way on the cross, when he bore our burdens, our shame, our sin, our sin's consequences. He put himself in our place so we could freely receive his benefits.

We can always find reasons to NOT help someone. We can point out that their problems are their fault, brought on by irresponsibility, and we don't want to subsidize or encourage immorality. Or we can tell ourselves that if we helped them, they would not be grateful enough. Again, Keller addresses this, following Jonathan Edwards:

> Edwards is arguing that if the basis for our ministry to the poor was simply a moral prescription, things might be different. But if the basis for our involvement with the poor is "the rules of the gospel," namely substitutionary sacrifice, then we must help the poor even when we think "we can't afford it." Edwards calls the bluff and says, "What you mean is, you can't help them without sacrificing and bringing suffering on yourself. But that's how Jesus relieved you of your burdens! And that is how you must minister to others with their burdens."
> In the most powerful part of the discourse, Edwards answers a series of common objections he gets when he preaches about the gospel-duty of giving to the poor. In almost every case, he uses the logic of the gospel—of

substitutionary atonement and free justification—on the objection. In every case, radical, remarkable, sacrificial generosity to the poor is the result of thinking out and living out the gospel. To the objection "I don't have to help someone unless he is destitute," Edwards answers that "the rule of the gospel" means that we are to love our neighbor as Christ loved us, literally entering into our afflictions. "When our neighbor is in difficulty, he is afflicted; and we ought to have such a spirit of love to him, as to be afflicted with him in his affliction." He then goes on to reason that, if we do this, we will need to relieve the affliction even if my neighbor's situation is short of destitution. To wait until people are utterly destitute before you help them shows that the logic of the gospel has not yet turned you into the socially and emotionally empathetic person you should be. Edwards takes on two other objections: "I don't want to help this person because he is of an ill temper and an ungrateful spirit" and "I think this person brought on their poverty by their own fault." This is an abiding problem with helping the poor. We all want to help kindhearted, upright people, whose poverty came on without any contribution from them and who will respond to your aid with gratitude and joy. Frankly, almost no one like that exists. And while it is important that our aid to the poor really helps them and doesn't create dependency, Edwards makes short work of this objection by again appealing not so much to ethical prescriptions but to the gospel itself.

> Christ loved us, was kind to us, and was willing to relieve us, though we were very evil and hateful, of an evil disposition, not deserving of any good . . . so we should be willing to be kind to those who are of an ill disposition, and are very undeserving. . . . If they are come to want by a vicious idleness and prodigality; yet we are not thereby excused from all obligation to relieve them, unless they continue in those vices. If they continue not in those vices, the rules of the gospel direct us to forgive them . . . . [For] Christ hath loved us, pitied us, and greatly laid out himself to relieve us from that want and misery which we brought on ourselves by our own folly and wickedness. We foolishly and perversely threw away those riches with which we were provided, upon which we might have lived and been happy to all eternity.

Edwards goes on to argue, wisely, that for the sake of children within families, sometimes we will need to sustain aid to families in which the parents do not turn away from their irresponsible behavior.

> In short, Edwards teaches that the gospel requires us to be involved in the life of the poor–not only financially, but personally and emotionally. Our giving must not be token but so radical that it brings a measure of suffering into our own lives. And we should be very patiently and nonpaternalistically open-handed to those whose behavior has caused or aggravated their poverty. These attitudes and dimensions of ministry to the poor proceed not simply from general biblical ethical principles but from the gospel itself.

Mercy is always messy. But it is crucial to the success of the church's mission in the world. Mercy is a key way we participate in God's own mission of restoring and perfecting the creation. If the ultimate end of God's redeeming work is a restored material world, a renewed universe, then God cares about bodies as much as souls. If the body is going to be finally fully redeemed in the resurrection, if Jesus ultimately intends to liberate his people not only spiritually but physically from the effects of sin, then ministry in word and deed have to be joined together, because both together point to the kingdom of God, and one without the other would truncate our witness to that kingdom.

Dealing with poverty means dealing with its root causes, which are both personal irresponsibility and social oppression (in other words, there are elements of truth in both conservative and liberal assessments of poverty, but neither is comprehensive). Poverty is almost never a simple thing, especially in cases of multi-generational urban poverty. The poor person is tangled up in a web of his own sin and the sin of others. He can only get free with the help of God's grace and God's people. Keller gives an excellent explanation of the causes of poverty:

> It is one thing to want to help the poor. It is another thing to go about it wisely. It is extremely easy to become involved in the life of a poor family and make things worse rather than better. One of the main reasons this happens so often is because of the two unbiblical political ideologies and reductionisms that reign in our culture today. Conservatives, in general, see poverty as caused by personal irresponsibility. Liberals, in general, see poverty as caused by unjust social systems; poor individuals have no ability to escape them.
> The Bible moves back and forth in calling ministry to the poor sometimes "justice" and sometimes "service" (*diakonia*) or mercy. Perhaps the most famous biblical appeal to help the poor is the parable of the Good Samaritan, in which this aid is called "mercy" (Luke 10:37). But elsewhere,

sharing food, shelter, and other basic resources with those who have fewer of them (Isa 58:6–10; cf. Lev 19:13, Jer 22:13) is called "doing justice." To fail to share is considered not simply a failure to be compassionate, but also a failure to be fair.

I think that the reason for this usage of both the terms "justice" and "mercy" is that the biblical explanation of the causes of poverty is much more complex than our current ideologies. The wisdom literature provides a remarkably balanced and nuanced view of the "root causes" of poverty. In Proverbs we see the familiar statements to the effect that "All hard work brings a profit, but mere talk leads only to poverty" (Prov 14:23). And yet we are also told, "A poor man's field may produce abundant food, but injustice sweeps it away" (Prov 13:23). Both personal and social, systemic factors can lead to poverty.

Actually, the Bible reveals at least three causal factors for poverty.

1. *Injustice and oppression:* This refers to any unjust social condition or treatment that keeps a person in poverty (Ps 82:1–8; Prov 14:31; Exod 22:21–27). The main Hebrew word for "the poor" in the Old Testament means "the wrongfully oppressed." Examples of oppression in the Bible include social systems weighted in favor of the powerful (Lev 19:15), high-interest loans (Exod 22:25–27), and unjustly low wages (Eph 6:8–9; Jas 5:4).
2. *Circumstantial calamity:* This refers to any natural disaster or circumstance that brings or keeps a person in poverty. The Scripture is filled with examples such as famines (Gen 47), disabling injury, floods, and fires.
3. *Personal failure:* Poverty can also be caused by one's own personal sins and failures, such as indolence (Prov 6:6–7) and other problems with self-discipline (Prov 23:21).

These three factors are intertwined. They do not usually produce separate "categories" of poverty (except in acute situations, such as a hurricane that leaves people homeless and in need of immediate short-term material care). Rather, the three factors are usually interactively present. For example, a person raised in an ethnic/economic ghetto (factor #1) is likely to have poor health (factor #2) and also learn many habits from their community that do not fit with material/social progress (factor #3).

Yet factor #3 can be seen as a version of factor #1. For example, the failure of a child's parents to read to them, nurture them, or teach them habits of honesty, diligence, and delayed gratification is factor #3 (personal irresponsibility) for the adults but factor #1 (injustice) for the children. Inner-city children, through no fault of their own, may grow up with vastly inferior schooling and with an overall environment extremely detrimental to learning. Conservatives may argue that this is the parents'

fault or the "culture's" fault while liberals see it as a failure of government and/or the fruit of systemic racism. But no one argues that it is the children's fault! Of course, it is possible for youth born into poverty to break out of it, but it takes many times more fortitude, independence, creativity, and courage simply to go to college and get a job than it does for any child born into a middle-class world. In short, some children grow up with about a two-hundred-times better opportunity for academic and economic success than others do. (You can't ask an illiterate eight-year-old–soon to be an illiterate seventeen-year-old–to "pull himself up by his bootstraps"!) Why does this situation exist? It is part of the deep injustice of our world. The problem is simply an unjust distribution of opportunity and resources.

In summary, many "conservatives" are motivated to help the poor mainly by compassion. This may come from a belief that poverty is mainly a matter of individual irresponsibility. It misses the fact that the "haves" have what they have to a great degree because of unjust distribution of opportunities and resources at birth. If we have the world's goods, they are ultimately a gift. If we were born in other circumstances, we could easily be very poor through no fault of our own. To fail to share what you have is not just uncompassionate but unfair, unjust. On the other hand, many "liberals" are motivated to help the poor mainly out of a sense of indignation and aborted justice. This misses the fact that individual responsibility and transformation has a great deal to do with escape from poverty. Poverty is seen strictly in terms of structural inequities. While the conservative "compassion only" motivation leads to paternalism and patronizing, the liberal "justice only" motivation leads to great anger and rancor.

Both views, ironically, become self-righteous. One tends to blame the poor for everything, the other to blame the rich for everything. One over-emphasizes individual responsibility, the other under-emphasizes it. A balanced motivation arises from a heart touched by grace, which has lost its superiority-feelings toward any particular class of people. Let's keep something very clear: it is the gospel that motivates us to act both in mercy and in justice. God tells Israel, "The alien living with you must be treated as one of your native-born. Love him as yourself, for you were aliens in Egypt. I am the Lord your God" (Lev 19:34). The Israelites had been "aliens" and oppressed slaves in Egypt. They did not have the ability to free themselves–God liberated them by his grace and power. Now they are to treat all people with less power or fewer assets as neighbors, doing

love and justice to them. So the basis for "doing justice" is salvation by grace!

We said at the beginning of this section that this balance of mercy and justice—of seeing both the personal and social aspects and causes of poverty—is necessary for a church's ministry to the poor to be wise. A conservative ideology will be far too impatient and probably harsh with a poor family and won't be cognizant of the more invisible social-cultural factors contributing to the problems. A liberal ideology will not put enough emphasis on repentance and personal change.

Later, he explains three level of counter-acting poverty:

[T]he church should recognize different "levels" of ministry to the poor and should know its limits.

1. *Relief:* This is direct aid to meet physical/material/social needs. Common relief ministries are temporary shelter for the homeless, food and clothing services for people in dire need, medical services, crisis counseling, and so on. A more active form of relief is "advocacy," in which people in need are given active assistance to get legal aid, help them find housing, and find other kinds of aid. Relief programs alone can create patterns of dependency.
2. *Development:* This is what is needed is to bring a person or community to self-sufficiency. In the OT, when a slave's debt was erased and he was released, God directed that his former master send him out with grain, tools, and resources for a new, self-sufficient economic life (Deut 15:13–14). "Development" for an individual includes education, job creation, and training. But development for a neighborhood or community means reinvesting social and financial capital into a social system–housing development and home ownership, other capital investments, and so on.
3. *Reform:* Social reform moves beyond relief of immediate needs and dependency and seeks to change social conditions and structures that aggravate or cause that dependency. Job tells us that he not only clothed the naked, but he "broke the fangs of the wicked and made them drop their victims" (Job 29:17). The prophets denounced unfair wages (Jer 22:13), corrupt business practices (Amos 8:2, 6), legal systems weighted in favor of the rich and influential (Lev 19:15; Deut 24:17), and a system of lending capital that gouges the person of modest means (Exod 22:25–27; Lev 19:35–37; 25:37). Daniel calls a pagan government to account for its lack of mercy to the poor (Dan 4:27). This means that Christians should

> also work for a particular community to get better police protection, more just and fair banking practices, zoning practices, and better laws.

1 Peter 2 makes it clear we should help marginalized people because the people of God have experienced marginalization. Marginalization will always be part of our corporate story and memory, even if/when we are the dominant influence in culture (e.g., a Christendom situation). Peter says we are aliens and strangers. But there are other aliens and strangers too – the impoverished, the lonely, the immigrant, etc. Because we have something in common with other disenfranchised groups, because we know what it's like to be an alien, we should be quick to love other aliens. This is how the Mosaic law put it for Israel: "The alien living with you must be treated as one of your native-born. Love him as yourself, for you were aliens in Egypt. I am the Lord your God" (Lev. 19:34).

Ultimately, we are driven to help the poor because we know that Jesus is the poor man. When we aid the poor, we serve Jesus himself. We must learn to see the face of Jesus in face of the downtrodden and oppressed. Here is how Keller puts it:

> Proverbs tells us that God identifies with the poor. "If you do it to the poor, you do it to me." Matt 25 says the same thing. I showed above that this means that on judgment day God will be able to judge a person's heart attitude toward him by the person's heart-attitude toward the poor. It also means, however, something more profound.
>
> In Proverbs and Matt 25, God identifies with the poor symbolically. But in the incarnation and death of Jesus, see God identifies with the poor and marginal literally. Jesus was born in a feeding trough. At his circumcision Jesus' family offered what was required of the poor (Luke 2:24). He said, "Foxes have holes and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has no place to lay his head" (Matt 8:20). At the end of his life, he rode into Jerusalem on a borrowed donkey, spent his last evening in a borrowed room, and when he died, he was laid in a borrowed tomb. They cast lots for his only possession, his robe, for there on the cross he was stripped of everything.
>
> All this gives new meaning to the question: "Lord, when did we see you hungry or thirsty or naked or in prison?" The answer is—*on the cross*, where he died amidst the thieves, among the marginalized. No wonder Paul could say that once you see Jesus becoming poor for us, you will never look at the poor the same way again.

Doug Wilson reminds us of our Reformed heritage in the area of mercy:

> When theology does what it was designed to do, which is flow through the streets of our nations like molten lava, it doesn't behave very much like a cold museum piece of basalt, something that *used* to be lava centuries ago.
>
> To follow the logic of the Lord Jesus, we should remember that He once said those who are sons of Abraham should bear some kind of family resemblance to him. In the same way, those who call themselves Calvinists should do the works of Calvin. This is really an enormous subject because the Reformation brought a huge transformation in the realms of liturgy, doctrine, politics, ethics, and, to bring us to the point before us now, *social welfare*. The Reformation brought a transformation in how the poor were loved, cared for, taught, and equipped to be self-sufficient. This means those among the Reformed today who urge that mercy ministry be at the very forefront of our labors are not necessarily in the process of "going liberal." Care for the indigent was one of the great works displayed in the Reformation. It was one of the central ways the solafidian Reformed answered the taunt -- "show us your faith."
>
> John Calvin himself put it this way: "Do we want to show there is reformation among us? We must begin at this point, that is, there must be pastors who bear purely the doctrine of salvation, and then deacons who have the care of the poor" (David Hall, *The Legacy of John Calvin*, p. 18). Hall also notes one study that shows, "contrary to some modern caricatures, the Reformers worked diligently to shelter refugees and minister to the poor" (Hall, p. 16).
>
> The kind of thing Calvin had in mind consisted of far more than feel good charitable gestures. He knew that living according to the gospel meant *sacrifice*.
>
> "In the period from October 1538 to 1539, the city hospital assisted 10,657 poor strangers as they passed through Geneva. This figure does not include those Genevans (estimated at about 5 percent of the total population) who received regular assistance from the hospital. Thus, when this order was issued, Geneva, a city of about 12,000 persons, was attempting to support 600 local poor people on a regular basis and an additional 10,000 in a one-year-period" (William Naphy, *Calvin and the Consolidation of the Genevan Reformation*, p. 122).
>
> The Reformers were in it for the long haul. "The ordinances which Calvin drew up in 1541 speak of the 'communal hospital' which had to be 'well maintained' with amenities available for the sick and the aged who were

unable to work, a quite separate wing for widows, orphaned children and other poor persons, and a hospice for wayfarers" (Ronald Wallace, *Calvin, Geneva & the Reformation* p. 92).

And it is not possible to say that Geneva was an oddity or quirk. This kind of thing was characteristic of all the Reformers -- it was something they were *known for*. Zurich and Scotland provide good examples.

In Zurich, "as the city's religious houses quickly lost members, the civic authorities seized the property of the houses and prohibited the taking of new monastic vows. One convent was kept open for those who desired to remain in holy orders. The bulk of the property formerly controlled by these institutions was diverted to support hospitals and a new system of poor relief . . . Officers in each parish oversaw the regular distribution of relief to the deserving poor" (Philip Benedict, *Christ's Churches Purely Reformed*, pp. 29-30).

"Scotland had few formal mechanisms for poor relief before the Reformation, but when a series of statutes between 1574 and 1592 produced a parish-based system for the relief of poverty modeled after the English poor law of 1572, the responsibility for levying and disbursing the funds came to reside not with the still embryonic justices of the peace but with the kirk sessions. The church and the its deacons thus came to control the national system of poor relief as it developed here" (Benedict, p. 455).

Of course, in this as in many areas, Geneva set a strong example. In Geneva, "Deacons responsible for the relief of the poor were the fourth [ordained order]" (Benedict, p. 88). And the "title of deacon was bestowed upon the administrators of the city's hospital . . ." (Benedict, p. 96).

But Calvin knew that the poor were not going to be helped through envy or sentimentalism, something that many modern relief workers need to learn. "If wealth was to flow it must first be produced. Those who have done careful research on the city records give an impressive account of how the authorities, during Calvin's time in Geneva, encouraged the establishment of new business enterprises" (Wallace, pp. 89-90).

But though it was no sin to be wealthy in Calvin's view, with great privilege came great responsibility.

"First [Calvin] insisted that as a law of life, where there was lavish wealth there must also be lavish giving by the rich to the poor . . . Certainly he held that every man had a right to own property. This was so basic to his outlook that he did not seek to justify the ownership of property to anything like the same extent as did Luther and Zwingli . . . Since wealth is thus given from above it cannot but be justifiable" (Wallace, pp. 90-91).

But even though the wealthy believers were to be taught to be generous, Calvin did not believe that this was sufficient by itself.

"But Calvin saw that in the developing commerical age even the utmost personal generosity could not be relied on to ensure the welfare of the poor. No private man could be expected to be able to seek them out of fully understand their need. Therefore it was the office of the deacon to keep in contact with them through visitation, to cooperate with the pastors and thus to become familiar with the actual problems of the home and to administer public welfare" (Wallace, p. 92).

When the Holy Spirit moves in remarkable ways, as He did in the Reformation, this kind of thing is something He always does. It is one of His emphases. It is His *signature*. Not only was this in evidence in the course of the Reformation, it has also been clear whenever there are outbreaks of real Calvinism. A good example would be the work of the great Scottish theologian, Thomas Chalmers.

Thomas Chalmers' "original efforts to overcome pauperism in Glasgow constitute the most effective early reaction of Christianity to the evils attendant on the Industrial Revolution" (John McNeill, *The Nature and Character of Calvinism*, p. 360).

But like Calvin, Chalmers was not a hand-wringer, complaining about how little *others* were doing on the taxpayer's dime. "Chalmers adopted the *laissez-faire* theory that Adam Smith propounded in *The Wealth of Nations* . . . For Chalmers the deliverance of the poor was not to come from government restriction or action" (p. 422). Not at all -- mercy is to be extended in the name of Christ, and should come from the *Church*.

This brings us down to the present, and, to quote Calvin again, "Do we want to show there is reformation among us?" The poor and helpless enter into how that question is answered.

Musician Rich Mullins on the poor:

Jesus said whatever you do to the least of these my brothers you've done it to me. And this is what I've come to think. That if I want to identify fully with Jesus Christ, who I claim to be my savior and Lord, the best way that I can do that is to identify with the poor. This I know will go against the teachings of all the popular evangelical preachers. But they're just wrong. They're not bad, they're just wrong. Christianity is not about building an absolutely secure little niche in the world where you can live with your perfect little wife and your perfect little children in a beautiful little house where you have no gays or minority groups anywhere near

> you. Christianity is about learning to love like Jesus loved and Jesus loved the poor and Jesus loved the broken.

Toby Sumpter has some helpful reminders of some of the challenges that accompany mercy work:

> it is dangerously easy to look at "extreme" mercy ministries as icons of faithfulness and sacrifice and at the same to overlook the strangers in our own midst. And these strangers are frequently members of our own family. Another way of putting this is that however mercy ministry is done, it must include the commitment to not increasing the problem. Caring for widows and orphans includes mercy ministry to our own wives and children so that we do not create new victims of neglect, abuse, and abandonment. It is not a victory for the Kingdom to serve homeless people in a soup kitchen while neglecting your 10 year old son at home, effectively creating a new homelessness in your own family. In other words, the call to hospitality must include serving our own family. Husbands and wives are called to minister mercy and friendship to one another, and they are called to minister grace and peace to their children. And of course it cannot stop with the family, but it can't forget it either. And of course by "family" I don't merely mean the biological unit either. Jesus came and redefined the family around himself, and while this doesn't obliterate the biological family, it reorients how we view each other within the family. We are first of all brothers and sisters in Christ called to serve one another. And that's "untamed hospitality" too.
>
> And the last point is just that discussing hospitality is a little like preaching a sermon on sins of the tongue or prayer. It definitely needs to be done, but it can be very easy to give people guilt trips without actually helping them make progress in the work of repentance and sanctification.

As I said in the 2/22 sermon, in terms of what this means for us, our deacon Ryan Nash put it well:

> We need to be present for the hurting of TPC and Cahaba Heights. We also need to be able to mobilize the fairly "well-off" Cahaba Heights community to serve others in our city and world.

This is exactly what we need to do when we move: We will have one foot in Cahaba Heights and one foot in the city of Birmingham. We want to minister to

the hurting in Cahaba Heights – but we also want to mobilize Cahaba Heights to serve the flourishing of the metropolitan area as a whole. We believe our new location will position us well to do this kind of parish-based, city-wide ministry.

CHURCH AS POLITICS:

What is the ultimate goal of the church's mission? It is to bring all of life and all of the world under the reign of the Lord Jesus Christ. We are aiming for the total renewal and transformation of the world – what the Bible calls the kingdom of God. It's a huge task – especially for such an incompetent group of people! The church catholic seems to bumble and stumble her way around; she does not exactly look like a well-trained, well-coordinated army right now. This is how Mike Goheen puts it:

> The task of God's people is to make known the good news of God's renewed reign over the entirety of creation. Christ's kingly authority extends over the whole world. God's mission is equally comprehensive: to embody the good news that Jesus again rules over marriage and family, business and politics, art and athletics, leisure and scholarship, sex and technology. Since the gospel is a gospel of the kingdom, that mission is as wide as creation.

The gospel gives us a comprehensive interpretation of reality, a total worldview in which everything is subjected to the lordship of Christ.

The church is political because she exists as the people of the world's one true king. She is political because she proclaims Christ as king over all.

When the early Christians declared Jesus to be God and man, they made all ancient politics obsolete. In every ancient culture, the Caesar/Pharaoh/King was considered to be god walking the earth. These rulers were considered divine; they were regarded as the connection points between heaven and earth. The church said, "NO! Jesus is the one true God-man, our only link to heaven." In this light, the state could no longer be considered divine. The gospel desacralized the ancient pagan political order. In a sense, you might even say it created a *secular* state (although that would be open to misunderstanding because the Christians certainly saw the political order under Christ's reign, and therefore religiously grounded and obligated). The Nicene Creed might be the most

politically explosive piece of theology ever written (excluding the canonical Scriptures, of course).

Unfortunately, today we are witnessing the modern West reverse the process of the early church. We are re-divinizing the state at a rapid pace. We are beginning to look for the state to do and be what only Christ can do and be. There is no such thing as "social security" through the state; the only true security is found in Christ. You see our statist idolatry emerge everytime there is a crisis – Americans (and other Westerners) now look to the state for answers and solutions. We glorify and celebritize politicians if they fit the right mold – certainly a step on the path back towards deifying our leaders.

But a divinized state very quickly becomes a demonized state. As the church, we have some very definite challenges ahead of us. A new kind of statism is developing, and while our public institutions are still very much a mix of residual Christian influence and raw, godless secularism, we would be foolish to ignore which way the wind is blowing.

Part of what we must do in response is embody the politics of the gospel (which means doing community and mission as already described). Some have suggested dropping out of American politics altogether. This cry has especially come from those who were prominent players in the "religious right" and got burned (out). The latest example if Cal Thomas's article, "Religious Right, R. I.P." (http://www.calthomas.com/index.php?news=2419). The funny thing is, people have been saying this about the evangelical wing of American politics for years now, and yet the phenomenon persists. I think Thomas makes some appropriate criticisms of the religious right, especially in its misguided attempts to legislate a moral code that had little or nothing to do with Scripture (e.g., prohibition). Thomas is right that many evangelicals have put too much faith in government and in the power of worldly politics to transform a nation's morals. Power, after all, is not the same as influence, and power all by itself does nothing to persuade. While Thomas is right to point out that evangelicals have been seeking first the wrong the kingdom, and while he is right to point Christians to the example of Jesus, his essay has an absolutely glaring omission, one that if not corrected, will continue to haunt and cripple any evangelical political involvement. Thomas completely ignores the church. He talks about individual Christians learning to imitate Jesus in their relationships – a wonderful thing, no doubt. But the institutional church is invisible for Thomas – as it has been for American evangelicals for 200+ years now. We need to learn that our failed political

endeavors are really rooted in a failed ecclesiology (if you can even say there is any such thing as an evangelical ecclesiology at this point).

It's time for the church, as the church to get up off the mat. It's time for evangelicals to recognize that their real political identity resides not in this or that party, but in the body of Christ. In the church, we learn how to do politics in the kingdom way; we can then take what we've learned with us when we go to participate in earthly political orders (which we still must do).

What kind of alternative political order does our city need us to be for the sake of the common good? There are many ways to answer this question, but here a few rough thoughts.

We have to practice our heavenly citizenship according to God's Word. We have to practice earthly citizenship not in a dualistic way, but in a way consistent with and integrated into our heavenly citizenship.

Dual citizenship is laid out for us very clearly in the book of Daniel. Daniel and his friends are faithful Hebrews carried off into exile in Babylon. They become strangers and aliens (and certainly Daniel's program and ministry is important background to 1 Peter 2:9). In Babylonian Daniel and his friends are given Babylonian names. Daniel is Daniel (his Hebrew name, meaning "The Lord is Judge") and Daniel is Belteshazzar (his Babylonian name, meaning "Protector"). But even when Daniel takes a Babylonian name, even when he walking through Nebuchadnezzar's palace as a high ranking official with the name "Belteshazzar" on his security badge, he is living as a faithful Hebrew, a faithful Daniel. Daniel did not become schizophrenic or dualistic. He fulfilled his Belteshazzar role in a way fully consistent with his deeper identity as Daniel. That is to say, his Daniel identity (e.g., a member of the covenant nation) controlled his Belteshazzar identity and role (as a high ranking official in the empire). Sometimes, Daniel was slandered for doing good (cf. 1 Peter 2:11-12). But he refused to compromise. He embraced the Belteshazzar role, without assimilating to Babylonian culture. He lived an integrated life. He was a leader in a pagan regime, but carried out his vocation in a distinctively covenantal way – with some pretty amazing results!!

As citizens of a heavenly kingdom, we are called to be a city within the city, a city on a hill. We are called to be a nation within the nation, a holy people dwelling in an unholy culture and society. As an alternative political order we serve the common good by modeling life the way God really intended it to be lived.

As Eugene Peterson has pointed out, politics is basically the management of power and relationships. We're all political beings, because we are made in the image of the Political God, the God who is King. In ancient civilizations only the king was considered to bear the image of God. According to Genesis 1-2, all human beings are image bearers, and therefore political.

For the church, politics, at root, is an aspect of being a royal, or kingly, priesthood (as Peter puts it). To be political does not necessarily means campaigning for office or lobbying legislators. There are other ways of being political, and many of them are intrinsic to the church's identity.

To speak of "the church as politics" sounds strange to American ears. It's odd to us because we don't want to be odd. The politics of the church is foreign because so many American Christians have privatized and individualized their faith. We see ourselves as having a private relationship with Jesus, but in our public life, we're not much different than anyone else. We end up copying the politics of the world.

1 Peter 2 shows us God's people should be recognizably different than the world. You should be able to spot a Christian marriage a mile away because of the way the husband and wife treat each other. Christian tax returns should be noticeably different, not just because they are honest, but because of the level of charitable giving we're doing. Christians should be easy to spot in the classroom and the workplace because of the integrity and quality of our work. Even if we're not the most naturally talented, our work ethic and desire to serve and to do the hard jobs no one else wants to do should get us noticed.

We are a people who serve the common good, as God defines the good (and of course since he alone is omniscient, he alone can define the common good). We are a people of mercy and righteousness in all of life – that's our politics.

Origen gives a good example of how Christians in the early church served the common good in a uniquely Christian way. They could not participate in Caesar's wars because of the pagan sacrifices that came to be required, but that did not mean they were to content to withdraw into a spiritual ghetto, serving only the interests of their own tribe. Origen wrote,

> We help the emperor in his extremities by our prayers and intercessions more effectively than do the soldiers. Just as the priests must keep their

> hands unsullied for sacrifice, so also must the Christians, who are all priests and servants of God, keep their hands unstained by blood that they may be able to pray for the Emperor and the army in just cause. In this way we overcome the real disturbers of the peace, the demons. Thus we fight for the Emperor more than the others, though we do not fight with him, nor at his command. We constitute an army of piety by our intercession with the Deity.

Origen's point is that Christians do more to defend the empire through prayer than Caesar's soldiers do by their warfare. If the war is just, Caesar may count on the church's support as an "army of piety."

Doug Wilson also emphasizes the political nature of our worship (emphasis mine):

> The modern world specializes in fragmentation. Everything is broken apart into little bits, so that autonomous man might have the illusion that this world can be controlled by man, piece by little piece. But we are Christians, who serve the God who made heaven and earth, and who then remade them in Jesus Christ our Lord. We therefore are learning to see all things as a complete and integrated whole.
>
> Among many other things, this means that we must learn to see our worship as a political act. Some Christians want to separate religion and politics entirely, leaving the political realm to the devil and his disciples. Other Christians want to embrace political action, but they want to subordinate the worship of God to the autonomous norms and standards of the secular political realm -- to do politics their way (yard signs and petitions) instead of God's way (hearing His word, eating bread and drinking wine). In other words, they want to subordinate the worship of the triune God to the standards of all the secular baals.
>
> Another option, which is significantly better, wants to worship God rightly, and then watch how this unfolds later on in the world of politics. This is good, but there is still too much distance involved.
>
> **We must learn to see that public worship *is* political. The preaching of the kingdom of God does not have to be made political. It can be made apolitical, but only through compromise. The rituals of the kingdom do not have to be *made* political—they declare, in a profound and unmistakable way, that our allegiance is to the City of God, and that all kings, congresses, parliaments, churches, denominations, synagogues,**

> **presidents, ambassadors, and any other name that can be named, must make their peace with the prince of that City.**
> So do not isolate this part of your life from the other aspects of your life. Your life must be integrated. But do not isolate this part of your life from your citizenry. You declare, every week, that there is no king but Jesus. You declare that His worship defines all other responsibilities. His authority extends to everything else. His power, His wisdom, His majesty, are above all.

Stanley Hauerwas and William H. Willimon explain the politics of the church (really, the politics of the cross) over against the world:

> The world, for all its beauty, is hostile to the truth. Witness without compromise leads to worldly hostility.
> The cross is not a sign of the church's quiet, suffering submission to the powers-that-be, but rather the church's revolutionary participation in the victory of Christ over those powers.
> The cross is not a symbol for general human suffering and oppression. Rather, the cross is a sign of what happens when one takes God's account of reality more seriously than Caesar's. The cross stands as God's (and our) eternal no to the powers of death, as well as God's eternal yes to humanity, God's remarkable determination not to leave us to our own devices.
> The overriding political task of the church is to be the community of the cross.

But there is still another dimension to this. We have just described how the church lives as a political institution. We are citizens of a heavenly nation. But we also need to say more about how the church trains us to fulfill the obligations of our earthly citizenship. Because of our membership in Christ's kingdom, we participate in the kingdoms of this world in a different way. We learn to do earthly politics in a unique way. Our heavenly citizenship is the pattern and template for our earthly citizenship, as John Calvin argued.

A recent essay by Greg Thompson had some helpful thoughts along these lines:

> [We must] return to the priority of the church. The church of Jesus is the place where we learn to be citizens of the world. It is here that we are given a vision of the purpose of humanity. Here that we learn to listen to the voice of another. Here that we learn to tell the truth about ourselves.

> Here that we learn to forgive sins. Here that we learn to give our money away. Here that we learn to intercede on behalf of others. Here that we learn of God's desire to feed the hungry. Here that we learn to labor toward a kingdom of peace. Each of these, enactments and foretastes of the kingdom of heaven, also provide the template for how we are to live as heaven's agents in the kingdom of this world. And so one of the first tasks in recovering citizenship is the formation of churches, little polities of love that both model the just society, and equip us to labor for its realization. All else flows from this, and is impossible apart from it….
>
> [The church must engage in] the nurture of public virtue. One of the most frightening characteristics of our current political life is how little reflection there is on civic virtue. In reflecting upon this it occurred to me that I couldn't remember a single forthright discussion about what used to be called "the civic virtues " in any mainstream, public forum. We hear lots of talk about the kind of policies we should embrace. And lots of talk about what candidates we should support. But very little talk about what kind of people we should be. This is very strange. Christians, ordered as they are around the fruit of the Spirit (which includes love, peace, patience, kindness, gentleness, and self-control) could play an important role in rehabilitating this public conversation. But this will require that we first nurture it among ourselves…
>
> [The church must create] the opportunity to cultivate the practices of citizenship. This will perhaps sound strange, but one of the most urgent civic tasks before the church is to form people who know how to participate in the work of citizenship. That is, people who have visions of the good, who know how to speak those visions, to listen to others, to compromise with one another, and to labor together for the common good. But, as any congregational (or denominational) gathering will bear out, we often struggle in these very tasks. If we are to go into our communities and labor to love our neighbors as citizens, it seems important for congregational leaders to prepare their people for civic life—not simply to win the culture wars—but to go and labor for the common good in obedience to the law of love.

That is to say, part of the church's political calling to create "depth personalities" – that is, to foster people who are *deep.* In our shallow, superficial, flat culture, it is vital that the church nurture people who are wise, mature, and multi-dimensional. Richard Foster has said superficiality is the curse of our age. And it

shows in our politics. Foster says the need of the hour is not more intelligent or more gifted people, but deep people, who are not controlled by instant gratification and who transcend our superficialities.

Finally, for a very good overview of the church as politics, see the writings of Lesslie Newbigin, e.g., chap. 5 of *Foolishness to the Greeks*. Here one sample of Newbigin on the church:

> The church is an entity which has outlasted many states, nations and empires, and it will outlast those that exist today. The Church is nothing other than that movement launched into the public life of the world by its sovereign Lord to continue that which he came to do until it is finished in his return in glory. It has his promise that the gates of hell shall not prevail against it. In spite of the crimes, blunders, compromises and errors by which its story has been stained and is stained to this day, the Church is the great reality in comparison with which nations and empires and civilizations are passing phenomena. The Church can never settle down to being a voluntary society concerned merely with private and domestic affairs. It is bound to challenge in the name of the one Lord all the powers, idealogies, myths, assumptions, and worldviews which do not acknowledge him as Lord. If that involves conflict, trouble, and rejection, then we have the example of Jesus before us and his reminder that a servant is not greater than his master.

Newbigin constantly says the church's calling is to speak truth to power, even if means she pays for it with her own blood. In other words, the church should bear witness to Christ's lordship in every area, come what may. The gospel is public truth, and that *fact* must not be compromised.

CONCLUSION

Remember how we judge success; Not by numerical or budgetary growth, not by having a nice bulding or feature stories about us on tv. The mark os success is this: Are we blessing to our city? We've been blessed by god in order to be a blessing. God promised blessing to all the families of the earth; we are to be that blessing, and to transmit that blessing. Is Birmingham a better city because we're here? Will Cahaba Heights be a better community once we're settled there? We need to pray to that end. And we need to work hard at serving the holistic

flourishing of the city, remembering that that flourishing can only come in Christ.

My two sermons were typical "vision casting" sermons, which means they were a real hodge-podge. In any vision discussion, you take a bunch of ingredients, dump them in the pot, and stir them all around. That's all I've done.

There are certainly limits to what vision talks can accomplish. As Tod Bolsinger has put it, "Culture trumps vision every time" (http://bolsinger.blogs.com/weblog/2008/06/culture-trumps-vision-everytime.html). Talking about it is not the same as doing it. We are in a good position, but where will we go from here?

I know we have a lot of work to do in continuing to sharpen and implement our vision. With an impending change of venue to Cahaba Heights later this year, I figured this was an ideal time to work through some of these issues. It's a good exercise for us to take a passage like 1 Peter 2, which is so dense with ecclesiological motifs and images, and mine it for all it's worth. 1 Peter 2 is one of the most compact, comprehensive descriptions of the church in the entire canon, which is why I keep coming back to it as a kind of manifesto for us.

We are on the cusp of a great opportunity, what will be (Lord willing) the nest step in our church's growth and maturation. It is my prayer we will not settle for having a bunch of abstract concepts rattling around in our heads. I pray

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Some further quotations on the church--

N. T. Wright on the church and gospel:

> The church thus embodies the gospel of the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. This is not merely to say that the church must live up to its own standards, or that it should be a large-scale visual aid of the truths it propounds, as though the gospel were still primary and the church secondary. While it is true that the details of church polity, etc., are ultimately secondary matters, the church itself is a primary matter, inseparable from the gospel itself, the message about Jesus Christ which can only be understood in the context of the church from Abraham to the present day and on to the Second Coming. The church is part of the

> Gospel: one component of the message of salvation is that in Jesus Christ God has created, is creating and will create 'a people for his own possession'. The church is not something tacked on at the end of the gospel as in much old dogmatic theology and much modern evangelical misunderstanding. If the gospel is wrenched out of the context of the people of God, it will not resonate with all its true overtones: that is, it cannot be properly understood except as the climax of Israel's history and the foundation of the church.

Doug Wilson on the real battle:

> The halls of Christendom have many banners hanging there, commemorating many astonishing victories from centuries past. Not surprisingly, our adversaries never want to visit that museum anymore. But we have to stop acting like our job is to get them to visit that museum. Our job is actually to take to the field and win another banner to hang in that museum. But always remember, the central instruments here will be pulpit and table, Word and sacrament.

Eugene Peterson on the institutional church:

> What other church is there besides institutional? There's nobody who doesn't have problems with the church, because there's sin in the church. But there's no other place to be a Christian except the church. There's sin in the local bank. There's sin in the grocery stores. I really don't understand this naive criticism of the institution. I really don't get it. Frederick von Hugel said the institution of the church is like the bark on the tree. There's no life in the bark. It's dead wood. But it protects the life of the tree within. And the tree grows and grows and grows and grows. If you take the bark off, it's prone to disease dehydration, death.
> So, yes, the church is dead but it protects something alive. And when you try to have a church without bark, it doesn't last long. It disappears, gets sick, and it's prone to all kinds of disease, heresy, and narcissism.
> In my writing, I hope to recover a sense of the reality of congregation - what it is. It's a gift of the Holy Spirit. Why are we always idealizing what the Holy Spirit doesn't idealize? There's no idealization of the church in the Bible - none. We've got two thousand years of history now. Why are we so dumb?

John Millbank on the church and society:

> I'm very much in a tradition of Anglican thinkers going back to John Neville Figgis who have insisted that the church is the purpose of salvation, it's not just the collection of believers or the saved. The church is the realization of salvation, because the church is the realization of reconciliation, ultimately b/t everybody. Ultimately the church is, as the Eastern Orthodox stress, bigger than the cosmos, because it's the cosmos linked to God and returned to God. So church for me is a very big reality. It's the site of the true human sociality. So, again, very much in the tradition of Anglican socialism I tend to see the church itself as the political vehicle. You don't need a political party, b/c the church has a social purpose that goes beyond the political understood in the normal sense, because it's not just about equal sharing and punishing wrongdoers. It's about forgiveness and reconciliation and restoring and giving superabundantly to each other. So it involves some kind of social purpose that can't be fully realized in this world but can to some extant and goes beyond the social purpose and the political purpose of the state, so much so that even ideally state functions should be minimalized in relation to ecclesiastical functions. The more we had real church in our economic practices, in our social practices … the less you would need these state functions. Liturgy also is crucial here: the sense that worshipping God is the true social purpose and that everything, all our economic activities are ultimately oriented to making the true worship of God in the kind of ritual patterns of the daily life that come to a head in what happens in a church. Without a sense of what binds us together you don't have a real society.

Gerhard Lohfink on God acting in and through Jesus and the church:

> God is active in the world at all times—but God acts through people. In Jesus, his Messiah, God acted with finality, and this messianic action of God continues in the church. The church is the place where the messianic renewal of the world, which God began irreversibly in Jesus, must go forward. That is the essence of the church. That is its calling.

Howard A. Snyder on the gospel:

> The gospel is global good news. Thinking globally, God acted locally. The gospel is good news about personal, social, ecological, and cosmic healing

and reconciliation. It is good news to the whole creation—to the whole earth and in fact to the cosmos.