

# Exiled Insiders

*Our Sempiternal, Subversive, Submissive Life  
in Two Kingdoms Ruled by One Crucified King*

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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

## INTRODUCTION

A Strange and Distant Land Called Home 2

## PART 1

**Our Sempiternal, Subversive, Submissive Life in the Spiritual Realm 7**

OUR GOAL IN THE SPIRITUAL REALM 8

*Combat Medics for Cultural Wars 8*

*Credible Non-Combatants 10*

OUR VOICE IN THE SPIRITUAL REALM 13

*America's New Religions 14*

*The Gospel as Heresy 15*

OUR WAY IN THE SPIRITUAL REALM 19

*The Predictable Pattern of Power 19*

*Christian Nietzscheans 21*

*The Subversive Power of Submission 22*

OUR OUTCOME IN THE SPIRITUAL REALM 24

*The Revolution Is Complete 25*

*Conviction Deficit Disorders 27*

## PART 2

**Our Sempiternal, Subversive, Submissive Life in the Temporal Realm 30**

OUR GOAL IN THE TEMPORAL REALM 31

*Hardened Hearts, a Permissive State, and Societal Peace 31*

*The Constraints of Coercive Power 33*

*Peaceful Space for Public Witness 35*

OUR VOICE IN THE TEMPORAL REALM 37

*The Sophistication of Slowness 38*

*The Perpendicular Planks of Paradox 39*

*In Practice 40*

OUR WAY IN THE TEMPORAL REALM 49

*Disenfranchised with the Franchise 50*

*Expectation in Our Stations 51*

## CONCLUSION

“But if not...” 54



## A Strange and Distant Land Called Home

In a strange and distant land,<sup>1</sup> a public-school district’s administrators decided not to allow a song entitled “Rainbowland” to be performed by a group of first grade students at the school’s spring concert. Although the song merely wishes for people of “every color, every hue” to be “free to be exactly who [they] are” (without getting into any specifics), administrators cited the district’s policy prohibiting political and controversial topics in the classroom as the basis for their decision.<sup>2</sup> After the students’ classroom teacher used a variety of media outlets to express her disagreement, the district school board voted 9-0 to terminate her contract.<sup>3</sup>

In a strange and distant land,<sup>4</sup> a city council unanimously passed a resolution declaring the city a sanctuary for transgender people. By the council’s own admission, the resolution was largely symbolic. It carried no force of law, but merely directed local authorities to make enforcement of potential future state legislation banning transgender therapy (even if only for minors) their lowest priority. The resolution was also somewhat redundant, considering an identical resolution was passed a week earlier by the county in which the city is located.<sup>5</sup>

In a strange and distant land,<sup>6</sup> the CEO of a professional football team was pressured to resign after just one day on the job. It was not because of anything he had said or done. Rather, it was discovered that the executive was also the chairman of a local Christian church that opposes homosexuality and abortion. In response to public pressure, the team president told the executive he could not retain his

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<sup>1</sup> Waukesha, Wisconsin, United States

<sup>2</sup> Lemoine, Bret. “Miley Cyrus’ ‘Rainbowland’ stirs Waukesha school concert controversy,” *Fox 6 Milwaukee*, 25 Mar. 2023, [www.fox6now.com/news/rainbowland-miley-cyrus-waukesha-heyer](http://www.fox6now.com/news/rainbowland-miley-cyrus-waukesha-heyer)

<sup>3</sup> Johnson, Alec. “The Waukesha teacher who criticized the school district’s ‘Rainbowland’ ban has been fired,” *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*, 13 Jul. 2023, [www.jsonline.com/story/news/education/2023/07/12/hearing-determines-fate-of-waukesha-teacher-who-criticized-rainbowland-ban/70392673007/](http://www.jsonline.com/story/news/education/2023/07/12/hearing-determines-fate-of-waukesha-teacher-who-criticized-rainbowland-ban/70392673007/)

<sup>4</sup> Madison, Wisconsin, United States

<sup>5</sup> Hogan, Shane. “Madison Common Council votes to make city a sanctuary for transgender people,” *Channel 3000*, 21 Jun. 2023, [www.channel3000.com/news/madison-common-council-votes-to-make-city-a-sanctuary-for-transgender-people/article\\_c5331a1c-1026-11ee-9e7b-bfaf2d172d22.html](http://www.channel3000.com/news/madison-common-council-votes-to-make-city-a-sanctuary-for-transgender-people/article_c5331a1c-1026-11ee-9e7b-bfaf2d172d22.html)

<sup>6</sup> Melbourne, Victoria, Australia, a place author Michael Bird says “makes California look like Alabama in comparison” (Bird xiv).

position with the church if he wanted to retain his position with the team.<sup>7</sup> Several days later, when the church's pastor was interviewed on a morning show, the show's host belittled the pastor for his Christian beliefs on national television.<sup>8</sup>

Which, if any, of these places do in fact seem like strange and distant lands? Which, if any, feel familiar and close to home? Which provides the most accurate depiction of the current state of affairs in our nation? Which provides the most plausible prediction of where our nation might be headed?

In other words, what should we make of the situation in which we currently find ourselves? Which is the greater sign of our times: the fact that, due in large part to the three justices appointed by a president evangelical Christians helped elect, the Supreme Court overturned *Roe v. Wade* in June of 2022, or that the Los Angeles Dodgers gave their Community Hero Award to the Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence at their annual Pride Night in June of 2023?<sup>9</sup> Who is the more influential prophetic voice of our day: Phil Robertson<sup>10</sup> or Lady Gaga? Are society's collective beliefs still best captured by the Declaration of Independence, the Pledge of Allegiance, and the "In God We Trust" we print on our money, or have these sacred texts of civic religion been supplanted by the Sparkle Creed?<sup>11</sup> What should we make of the fact that on the June 15, 2023, episode of *Jeopardy!*, none of the three contestants could correctly supply "hallowed" as the single missing word in the first line of the Lord's Prayer?<sup>12</sup>

One recent analysis of our current moment that drew a fair bit of attention proposed that our society has moved from a positive stance toward Christianity (pre-1994) to a neutral stance toward Christianity (1994-2014) and now to a negative stance toward Christianity (2014-present).<sup>13</sup> Another analysis of Christians' ability to influence modern American culture declared already back in 2016:

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<sup>7</sup> "Australian Rules-Essendon CEO quits after one day in the job over church links," *Reuters*, 4 Oct. 2022, [www.reuters.com/lifestyle/sports/australian-rules-essendon-ceo-quits-after-one-day-job-over-church-links-2022-10-05/](http://www.reuters.com/lifestyle/sports/australian-rules-essendon-ceo-quits-after-one-day-job-over-church-links-2022-10-05/)

<sup>8</sup> "Kochie clashes with City on a Hill pastor over Bible's relevance," *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 7 Oct. 2022, [www.smh.com.au/national/kochie-clashes-with-city-on-a-hill-pastor-over-bible-s-relevance-20221007-p5b05s.html](http://www.smh.com.au/national/kochie-clashes-with-city-on-a-hill-pastor-over-bible-s-relevance-20221007-p5b05s.html)

<sup>9</sup> "Los Angeles Dodgers reinstate gay 'nun' group for Pride Night award," *Associated Press*, 22 May 2023, [apnews.com/article/los-angeles-dodgers-pride-night-lgbt-sisters-of-perpetual-indulgence-67ac5dd13bc8b929f57c0185b0713e0f](https://apnews.com/article/los-angeles-dodgers-pride-night-lgbt-sisters-of-perpetual-indulgence-67ac5dd13bc8b929f57c0185b0713e0f)

<sup>10</sup> "*Duck Dynasty*, the reality television show featuring the Robertson family, debuted in 2008, and by 2013 it had become one of the most popular shows on television, with its fourth season premier drawing almost twelve-million viewers, more than the highest viewed episodes of critical favorites *Breaking Bad* and *Mad Men* combined" (Du Mez 245).

<sup>11</sup> Feland, Hayley. "Edina Lutheran church recites 'sparkle creed,' professes belief in 'non-binary god,'" *Alpha News*, 28 Jun. 2023, [alphanews.org/edina-lutheran-church-recites-sparkle-creed-professes-belief-in-non-binary-god/](https://alphanews.org/edina-lutheran-church-recites-sparkle-creed-professes-belief-in-non-binary-god/)

<sup>12</sup> Yang, Angela. "'Jeopardy' fans reel as 'Lord's Prayer' question goes unanswered," *NBC News*, 15 Jun. 2023, [www.nbcnews.com/news/jeopardy-question-lord-prayer-hallowed-mayim-bialik-rcna89571](https://www.nbcnews.com/news/jeopardy-question-lord-prayer-hallowed-mayim-bialik-rcna89571)

<sup>13</sup> Renn *The Three World's of Evangelicalism*. Renn's article drew strong reaction in part because it mentioned Rev. Tim Keller by name. Responses included one from David French ([thedispatch.com/newsletter/frenchpress/a-critique-of-tim-keller-reveals/](https://thedispatch.com/newsletter/frenchpress/a-critique-of-tim-keller-reveals/)) who drew a response from Rod Dreher ([www.theamericanconservative.com/tim-keller-david-french-myxomatosis-christians/](https://www.theamericanconservative.com/tim-keller-david-french-myxomatosis-christians/)) who drew a response from James Wood ([www.americanreformer.org/2022/05/this-article-is-not-about-tim-keller/](https://www.americanreformer.org/2022/05/this-article-is-not-about-tim-keller/)). Finally, Renn responded to all the responses ([www.aaronrenn.com/p/the-three-worlds-of-evangelicalism-7fc](https://www.aaronrenn.com/p/the-three-worlds-of-evangelicalism-7fc)).

“It is over.”<sup>14</sup> Descriptions like “secularized,” “post-Christendom,” and “post-Christian” have been used to describe our society for years now. As far back as 1989, one author stated with precision that Christendom, birthed by Constantine’s Edict of Milan in 313 A.D., died on a Sunday evening in 1963 when a Greenville, South Carolina, movie theater started having showings on Sundays.<sup>15</sup>

No matter how one analyzes our current situation, it is hard to dispute that we live in a world we would not have recognized ten years ago.<sup>16</sup> It is not difficult to imagine that we live in a world we will not recognize ten years from now. As a result, it has been increasingly common for Christians to make use of the Bible’s exilic imagery to describe their place in the world. It is common to hear American Christians refer to themselves as exiles, aliens, foreigners, and sojourners. It is common to hear them refer to America as Babylon.<sup>17</sup> None of this is surprising, considering both the extensiveness of the available biblical material<sup>18</sup> and the amount our circumstances have changed in the last half century. In most cases, the rationale for adopting exilic language springs from what has changed about those circumstances. Christians’ status as exiles is seen as a new state of affairs, regardless of the precise date we consider the old state of affairs to have ended.

So should we jump on the exilic bandwagon and weep by the rivers of Babylon as we reminisce about yesteryear in Zion?<sup>19</sup> Not everyone thinks so. For starters, an America that seems fully secularized to some still seems thoroughly Christianized to others.<sup>20</sup> For as much as Christians might whip themselves into a frenzy over the latest anti-Christian sentiment coming from Hollywood, Silicon Valley, or Washington D.C., Christian people, churches, and leaders are still viewed positively in vast swaths of the country and by large segments of the population. Even though movie theaters in South Carolina have been open on Sundays for sixty years now, every franchise of the nation’s fifth largest fast food chain is still closed, even the ones located inside NFL stadiums.<sup>21</sup> More significantly, the highest court in our land recently ruled – unanimously, no less – that an agency of the federal government had to accommodate an employee’s refusal to work on the Lord’s Day.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Trueman *The Rise of the Anti-Culture*

<sup>15</sup> Hauerwas 15ff

<sup>16</sup> 2013 was the year Hilary Clinton first expressed public support for same-sex marriage.

Neuman, Scott. “Hillary Clinton Announces Her Support of Gay Marriage” *National Public Radio*, 18 Mar. 2013, [www.npr.org/sections/thetwo-way/2013/03/18/174633970/hillary-clinton-announces-her-support-of-gay-marriage](http://www.npr.org/sections/thetwo-way/2013/03/18/174633970/hillary-clinton-announces-her-support-of-gay-marriage)

<sup>17</sup> For example, see Richard John Neuhaus, *American Babylon: Notes of a Christian in Exile*.

<sup>18</sup> Exilic language and imagery can be drawn from more than the 70-year period during which the tribes of Judah were in Babylon. From Abraham living in tents in Canaan to his descendants being held in Egypt for four centuries to the tribes of Judah serving as political pawns as their land was ruled by Babylon, then Persia, then Greece, and then Rome, God’s people living in a land not their own was far more the rule than the exception. Roughly two-thirds of the books of the Bible (43 out of 66 books) are written about or addressed to the people of God as they lived in a land under foreign control, including the entirety of the New Testament.

<sup>19</sup> Psalm 137:1

<sup>20</sup> Bird 119–120

<sup>21</sup> Ward, Sean. “Why Is There a Chick-fil-A in Mercedes-Benz Stadium?,” *Chick-fil-A*, 22 Dec. 2017, [www.chick-fil-a.com/stories/inside-chick-fil-a/why-is-there-a-chick-fil-a-in-mercedes-benz-stadium](http://www.chick-fil-a.com/stories/inside-chick-fil-a/why-is-there-a-chick-fil-a-in-mercedes-benz-stadium)

<sup>22</sup> Totenberg, Nina and Gupta, Meghanlata. “The Supreme Court rules against USPS in Sunday work case,” *National Public Radio*, 29 Jun. 2023, [www.npr.org/2023/06/29/1182121772/supreme-court-religious-freedom-postal-worker-decision](http://www.npr.org/2023/06/29/1182121772/supreme-court-religious-freedom-postal-worker-decision)

Others prefer to avoid exilic imagery because of the strategy to which they assume it inevitably leads.<sup>23</sup> In recent years, author Rod Dreher's *Benedict Option* has come to embody – fairly or unfairly – a strategy of withdrawal from public life while the tidal wave of secularism washes over.<sup>24</sup> Dreher's proposals are far older than his book, however. An informal cadre of authors sometimes referred to as neo-Anabaptists<sup>25</sup> has been offering similar strategies for decades.<sup>26</sup> Whether or not this label is warranted, it's no surprise that strategies of withdrawal packaged in exilic language are viewed as unsatisfactory by Lutherans committed to active engagement in both of Christ's kingdoms.<sup>27</sup>

So will an exilic identity automatically lead to a monastic strategy? It does not have to, especially if we take our cues from the New Testament book that uses exilic language most extensively. As much as Old Testament books like Daniel and Jeremiah are useful, both approach the issue of exile from the same standpoint as many modern analyses. They speak to people whose exilic status is a new condition brought about by a change in circumstance. In contrast, 1 Peter situates our exilic state in a different sort of change. We are exiles, not because the earthly kingdom to which we once belonged has changed to such a degree that we are no longer at home in it. Instead, we are exiles by virtue of our birth into a new, spiritual kingdom.<sup>28</sup> Our status as exiles is not a new state of affairs that ensues at whatever point we collectively conclude, "There goes the neighborhood." Rather, exile is our birthright. The difference that exists between us and our surroundings is not the result of what those surroundings are compared to what *they* used to be. It is the result of what we are compared to what *we* used to be.

This alternate perspective about our exilic status naturally influences our strategy for living within that status.

Christians do not come into their social world from outside seeking either to accommodate to their new home (like second generation immigrants would), shape it in the image of the one they have left behind (like colonizers would), or establish a little haven in the strange new world reminiscent of the old (as resident aliens would). They are not outsiders who either seek to become insiders or maintain strenuously the status of outsiders. Christians are the *insiders* who have diverted from their culture by being born again...Christian difference is therefore not an insertion of something new into the old from outside, but a bursting out of the new *precisely within the proper space of the old*.<sup>29</sup>

This suggests that an accurate analysis of our circumstances may not be as important as we might assume. It suggests that the pressing question of our day is not so much whether our circumstances warrant an identification as exiles but why

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<sup>23</sup> For an example of a critique of Aaron Renn's "Three Worlds" analysis, and one that is based largely on the inadequate strategies it will lead to, see Jacobs.

<sup>24</sup> Dreher's titular strategy for societal engagement has become so common that it is often referred to simply as "BenOp." Among those fond of criticizing it, it is often referred to as "The Benedict Opt-Out." R.R. Reno referred to it as "Breitbart with incense" (Bird 11).

<sup>25</sup> For example, see Hunter 150ff. The list of members varies but John Yoder, John Milbank, Stanley Hauerwas, Alasdair MacIntyre are some of the more prominent names often included.

<sup>26</sup> East Theologians Were Arguing About the Benedict Option 35 Years Ago

<sup>27</sup> For example, see Schumacher 169ff.

<sup>28</sup> 1 Peter 1:1–3

<sup>29</sup> Volf 18–19, emphasis original.



we would have ever considered ourselves anything else in the first place. It suggests that, no matter how foreign our surroundings seem compared to what they once were, we still have the opportunity to influence those surroundings positively as we work and witness in both of Christ's kingdoms.

The speed at which our world is changing can lead to a great deal of hand-wringing and hair-pulling as Christians try to find a way forward. What follows aims to demonstrate that we have been thoroughly equipped, as promised, for the good work of our day through the God-breathed Scriptures. Those Scriptures – especially 1 Peter – help us see our place in the world: not as immigrants, colonizers, refugees, or resident aliens, but as *exiled insiders*. They help us see the specific good works God has prepared in advance for us as such: not for us to become like our world nor expect it to become like us, but to continually “blend out”<sup>30</sup> from this, the strange and distant land that is also our native-born home. As we explore this status and the strategy that flows from it, we will see that our exilic life is *sempiternal*.<sup>31</sup> It is not the product of changing circumstances but was ours during the Eisenhower Era<sup>32</sup> every bit as much as it is today. Our exilic life is *subversive*. As citizens in both kingdoms, it is impossible for us not to be upending the natural order of things into which Christ and his gospel have entered and out of which Christ's people have emerged. Finally, our exilic life is *submissive*. The two kingdoms are both ruled by one crucified king who could not have set a clearer pattern in how he established his reign and could not have given clearer direction for how he plans to continue that reign through us.

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<sup>30</sup> Watkin echoes Volf's assessment that our exilic status is not akin to the experience of someone who has newly come to a distant, different place. Rather it is the experience of someone who has become different from what he or she once was. “Christian exiles are the opposite of modern tourists. The tourist feels out of place on holiday but tries desperately to appear like a local. In the exact inverse of this late modern modish globetrotting, the Christian feels all too much at home in the earthly city but tries desperately to see late modern life as the complex, strange, delightful, moribund, free, bloated scandal that it really is. If the tourist is desperate to blend in and become just like the locals, the Christian should be equally determined to ‘blend out’” (Watkin 485).

<sup>31</sup> In contrast to “eternal,” which refers to that which exists outside of time, *sempiternal* refers to that which exists in time but continues indefinitely. Carl Trueman describes modern culture as anti-historical. Its sole obsession is the pleasure of the moment. Within such a culture, the great hero is the “sempiternal orgiast, the one who lives for the pleasure of the moment. Once the end of human existence was identified with happiness and happiness came to be identified with pleasure and pleasure came to be identified primarily with sexual gratification, the game was up for history. For the sempiternal orgiast has no need for history for he has no time—no past and no future, just the intensity of the pleasure of the present moment” (Trueman *Sex Trumps History*). In a culture such as that, “sempiternal exile” seems an appropriate title for the child of God.

<sup>32</sup> Christians can easily vacillate between longing for or loathing this bygone era depending on which of the two suits their purposes at the moment. When we sensed we lived in Aaron Renn's “neutral world,” it was easy to heap scorn on “nominal Christianity” and even celebrate the demise of its “soft, squishy middle.” The more we feel the influence of Renn's “negative world,” the more we are tempted to change our tune. Lest we become too nostalgic about it, Ross Douthat offers this assessment: “In the Eisenhower era, as in our own, frequent churchgoing and public professions of piety often coexisted with scriptural ignorance and spiritual self-satisfaction; ‘American’ values often trumped genuinely Christian ones when the two threatened to conflict; and Eisenhower's famous remark that American democracy depended on ‘a deeply felt religious faith, and I don't care what it is’ seemed to be the first and greatest commandment for many believers” (Douthat 52). A contemporary critic of 1950s American Christianity quipped, “President Eisenhower, like many Americans, is a very fervent believer in a very vague religion” (Putnam and Campbell 88).



{ PART 1 }

# Our Sempiternal, Subversive, Submissive Life in the Spirit- tual Realm

OUR GOAL IN THE SPIRITUAL REALM 8  
OUR VOICE IN THE SPIRITUAL REALM 13  
OUR WAY IN THE SPIRITUAL REALM 19  
OUR OUTCOME IN THE SPIRITUAL REALM 24

## Our Goal in the Spiritual Realm

*Perhaps there is another way, starting with efforts of people of goodwill to form distinctive countercultural communities in ways distinct from the deracinated and depersonalized forms of life that liberalism seems above all to foster. As the culmination of liberalism becomes more fully visible, as its endemic failures throw more people into economic, social, and familial instability and uncertainty,... such communities of practice will increasingly be seen as lighthouses and field hospitals to those who might once have regarded them as peculiar and suspect.*

– PATRICK DENEEN<sup>33</sup>

*Once you were not a people, but now you are the people of God; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy.*

– 1 PETER 2:10

Unlike the nations of Christ’s temporal realm, the “holy nation”<sup>34</sup> of Christ’s spiritual realm cannot be geographically confined, legislatively mandated, or genetically inherited. Every present citizen of “the people of God” was formerly “not a people.” Every future citizen of “the people of God” is presently “not a people.” The border wall surrounding this holy nation is clearly defined but fully permeable. Thus, those who belong to it have a clear goal: to declare God’s praises that those stuck in the cold darkness outside may be brought into the warmth and light within.

### COMBAT MEDICS FOR CULTURAL WARS

As our nation was engaged in its bloodiest conflict, Clara Barton earned a name for herself as a combat medic. Known as the “Angel of the Battlefield,” she seemed to have a knack for arriving with aid at just the right time. Though she officially served as part of the Union effort, she assisted the wounded from both sides, a legacy the organization she founded maintains to this day.

Ours is a time not of civil war but of cultural war.<sup>35</sup> No matter which skirmish is dominating the news cycle, the battle lines form quickly. Politicians, pundits,

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<sup>33</sup> Deneen 197. Deneen is using the term *liberalism* in its more historical and technical sense, not as the opposite of *conservativism*. The contrast Deneen draws in his book is between what he calls progressive liberals and conservative liberals.

<sup>34</sup> 1 Peter 2:9

<sup>35</sup> The term “culture war” became popular in modern parlance starting with James Davison Hunter’s 1991 book, *Culture Wars: The Struggle To Control The Family, Art, Education, Law, And Politics In America*. Many would describe the conflicts of our day as “anticulture wars.” See, for example Deneen 64ff, 131, and Trueman *The Rise of the Anticulture*.

celebrities, authors, and keyboard warriors fall into formation, and the rounds of ammunition start flying. A cable news outlet criticizes the convoy of truckers protesting Canada's vaccine mandate. Another praises them as courageous, freedom-loving heroes. Fortune 500 companies outfit their products and stores with rainbow colors for Pride Month. Customers in middle America mock and boycott them. A local school board implements curriculum aimed at greater inclusion for racial and sexual minorities. Soon the monthly board meetings draw crowds of angry parents and devolve into shouting matches. A company's human resources department implements a policy asking employees to list their pronouns in their email signatures.<sup>36</sup> In the break room at lunch, a table of men exchange laughs as they discuss it. A gender-fluid TikTok influencer shares a video that goes viral. A Twitter account<sup>37</sup> retweets the video and a virtual mob soon arrives, pitchforks in hand.

It's easy to think that each of these skirmishes deserves some fire from us: a quick jab in a sermon, a soapbox speech during Bible class, perhaps even a comment on social media. In the meantime, however, there are real people getting caught in the crossfire, people who are not cyberworlds away shielded by smartphone screens but people with whom we have actual contact. A middle school girl who sits in your pews every week doesn't know what to do now that her entire friend group is claiming various new forms of gender identity. A member who teaches in the public school spends her week working with the curriculum being debated at the school board meeting and the kids who are learning from it. A young couple who recently started attending church and who are open to what the Bible says wonder what to do about their coworkers, good friends, and family members who are gay. The young adult children of members who have stopped going to church and have soured toward Christianity are planning to join their parents in church on Christmas Eve and will surely be watching to see if it's true that Christians think they are exempt from the local mask mandate. A member works at the company requesting the use of identifying pronouns and is surrounded by unchurched coworkers who know she is a Christian. A confirmation student who struggles to fit in with her peers sees the video of the gender fluid TikTok influencer and announces to her mom that she's nonbinary. While the air is filled with fire from the heavy artillery units, the battlefield is being littered with people who are taking the stray bullets each side intends for the other.

This is both the beauty and the messiness of a kingdom that can't be geographically confined, legislatively mandated, or genetically inherited, one in which the new is constantly bursting out from within the space of the old. This is what authors Robert Putnam and David Campbell refer to as the "My Friend Al" principle. For most Americans, discussions around hotly contested issues are more than

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<sup>36</sup> "Preferred pronouns" is now considered offensive ([www.hrdive.com/news/the-talent-textbook-why-hr-shouldnt-ask-for-preferred-pronouns/609821/](http://www.hrdive.com/news/the-talent-textbook-why-hr-shouldnt-ask-for-preferred-pronouns/609821/)) as it implies that one's gender identity is a merely a preference.

<sup>37</sup> Whatever we're supposed to call it now ([www.nytimes.com/2023/08/03/technology/twitter-x-tweets-elon-musk.html](http://www.nytimes.com/2023/08/03/technology/twitter-x-tweets-elon-musk.html)), Libs of TikTok is one of its most influential accounts, boasting 2.4 million followers as of August 2023.

abstract academic exercises. They are about a real person they know and love, a “Friend Al.”<sup>38</sup>

This is a wonderful blessing for Christians who increasingly occupy the unpopular position in cultural battles. Who cares if the messages that come out of Hollywood or Washington, D.C. portray Christians as science-denying, intolerant bigots? Most people are more likely to form their opinion of Christians from the real-life interactions they have with them. The “My Friend Al Principle” allows us to “silence the ignorant talk of foolish people.”<sup>39</sup>

The “My Friend Al Principle” has a corollary, however: the “Aunt Susan Principle.” If we take aim at only the most aggressive and extreme manifestations of a particular issue, people will compare what they hear from the pulpit with the much more reasonable and humane impression they get from a real person, an “Aunt Susan.” Presented with the options that every teacher who reads a book about gender ideology to kids is a “groomer” and the experience they have with their child’s actual teacher, people will give far more weight to the latter than the former.

Staying focused on our mission in the spiritual kingdom doesn’t make the mine field of our cultural wars any easier to navigate. At the very least, however, it means we have the right goal as we attempt to navigate it. It ensures that, even as bullets fill the air, we are focused on tending to the wounded at our feet.

## CREDIBLE NON-COMBATANTS

If that’s the case, we need to maintain our credibility as people able to help them. About the same time Clara Barton was assisting the wounded on the battlefields of the Civil War, protections for combat medics were first being outlined in the Geneva Conventions. Shooting at medical personnel became a war crime. In turn, combat medics could not be armed. The red cross became the universal symbol used to identify those providing aid. It let the wounded know where they could find help, even if it was attached to the arm of someone wearing the opposing side’s colors.

Christians – including Christian pastors – have an obligation to use their voice to be a blessing in the temporal realm. As they do however, Christians – especially Christian pastors – need to be aware of the fact that our engagement in the temporal realm can easily undermine our work in the spiritual realm.

Why this is the case can be debated. That this is the case is hard to dispute. Rightly or wrongly, public perception is that conservative American Christianity and the Republican Party are joined at the hip. This union has arguably been beneficial for the Republican Party in its goal of winning elections. It is harder to make the case that the benefit has been mutual. The long story of post-World-War-II Christianity has been summarized simply as “a shock and two aftershocks.”<sup>40</sup> The

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<sup>38</sup> According to Putnam and Campbell’s research, 2.4 of the average American’s five closest friends do not share their religion (523). They conclude that our nation’s uniquely “American grace” lay in the fact that “Most Americans are intimately acquainted with people of other faiths” (526).

<sup>39</sup> 1 Peter 2:15

<sup>40</sup> Putnam and Campbell 91ff

initial shock was the social upheaval of the so-called “long Sixties,”<sup>41</sup> chief of which was the overhaul of sexual morality. The first aftershock was conservative Christianity’s reaction and its use of politics to fight back (i.e. the development of the Christian Right). The second aftershock was the negative reaction to Christianity’s politicization and the precipitous decline in religious participation we are now seeing.

Thus, we live at a time when the marriage between the Republican Party and the Christian Right has affected each inversely. In fact, the pinnacle of the benefit brought to the former and the harm done to the latter may have occurred at precisely the same moment. “[A]t the same time the Christian Right acquired and exercised its greatest power—culminating in the 2004 presidential election—this movement also generated greater hostility toward the Christian faith than ever before in the nation’s history.”<sup>42</sup> Not to be outdone, the 2016 election came along and said, “Hold my beer,” as Christian leaders “messianized Trump to look like Jesus and caesarized Jesus to look like Trump.”<sup>43</sup> Fairly or unfairly, many Americans see the symbol marking the arm of American Christians as a red elephant rather than a red cross.

How long this marriage will last remains to be seen. For now, the Republican Party finds the support of religiously conservative Americans advantageous. If biblical positions on homosexuality and abortion become less popular, that may change. Divorce may be in the offing. In the meantime, it seems “clear which side has the better deal,” causing Christians frequently to be labeled the “useful idiots of the Republican party.”<sup>44</sup>

None of this is to suggest how Christians ought to vote. It is to suggest that Christians ought to be aware of how their vocal and visible support for a political party affects the credibility of their gospel witness. Christians may be convinced that one party stands for certain moral positions that align with biblical teaching. However, outspoken supporters of that same party may represent the very opposite of what Christians want associated with their faith.<sup>45</sup> One party’s candidate may support policies that are arguably in the best interest of the country. However, that same candidate may regularly misquote Bible passages – perhaps even disingenuously – in a way that leaves a bad taste in people’s mouths and distorts the gospel.<sup>46</sup> If nothing else, Christians should be very hesitant to suggest that a person’s Christian faith would dictate a vote for one party or another. It is worth remembering that the demographic group that prays most frequently, goes to church most

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<sup>41</sup> In his 2017 book by that name, Christopher Strain identified the long Sixties as the period from 1955-1973. The term had been in use prior to that, and more generally “refers to the fact that much of what is commonly referred to as ‘the Sixties’ lasted through the early 1970s (Putnam 80–81).

<sup>42</sup> Hunter 128. Ross Douthat agrees: “Having a conservative Evangelical in the White House, it turned out, didn’t necessarily make it easier for conservative Christians to win converts or to gain ground in moral and cultural debates. Indeed, in certain ways it seemed to make it harder. The president’s very public piety made it easy for his detractors to lay the blame for his administration’s policy failures at the door of Evangelical Christianity itself, so that the more things soured for the Bush administration, the more they soured for Evangelicals as well” (Douthat 136-137).

<sup>43</sup> Bird 82

<sup>44</sup> Hunter 128

<sup>45</sup> Layman, Geoffrey. “Where is Trump’s evangelical base? Not in church,” *Washington Post*, 29 Mar. 2016, [www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2016/03/29/where-is-trumps-evangelical-base-not-in-church/](http://www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2016/03/29/where-is-trumps-evangelical-base-not-in-church/)

<sup>46</sup> For examples from politicians in both parties, see chapters 1 and 2 of Williams.

faithfully, and takes the teachings of the Bible most seriously also votes Democrat overwhelmingly.<sup>47</sup>

When institutions lose a sense of their unique purpose, “a culture at war with itself comes to be at war everywhere.”<sup>48</sup> If engagement in our cultural wars isn’t a sound strategy for beer companies and big box retailers,<sup>49</sup> how much less Christ’s Church? If we’re concerned that a refusal to engage amounts to surrender to “wokeism,” “Marxism,” “DEI,” “CRT,” or whatever other ill-defined bogeyman we’re convinced is in the opposite trench, we can take solace in the fact that plenty of non-Christian combatants are happy to go to war against the worst excesses of secularism.<sup>50</sup> By refusing to take up arms in solidarity with one side or another, the eternal gospel remains in midair, high above the fray.<sup>51</sup>

In our time of cultural war, there is no shortage of soldiers. However, Christians may be the only ones ready and willing to tend to the wounded from either side. If what’s already happening elsewhere is any indication,<sup>52</sup> even those currently causing mass casualties may soon be looking for aid. When they do, only those who “once...had not received mercy, but now...have received mercy” will be ready to offer mercy to them as well.

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<sup>47</sup> “Even today, the group of people who, according to public opinion surveys, are the most consistent churchgoers, dedicated Bible readers, and committed prayer warriors in the United States are also the most strongly committed Democrats, because black women are, in general, simultaneously the most dedicated Christians the most loyal Democratic voters in the nation” (Williams 60). “[W]ho personifies the most religious type of American? An older African American woman who lives in a Southern small town” (Putnam and Campbell 28).

<sup>48</sup> Levin 36. Carl Trueman calls this the disappearance of the prepolitical (*The Rise and Triumph of the Modern Self* 197).

<sup>49</sup> Berger, Chloe. “From Bud Light to Target, Pride month saw rainbow capitalism dim in 2023,” *Fortune*, 30 Jun. 2023, [www.fortune.com/2023/06/30/bud-light-target-rainbow-capitalism-dimmed-june-2023/](http://www.fortune.com/2023/06/30/bud-light-target-rainbow-capitalism-dimmed-june-2023/)

<sup>50</sup> James Lindsay, Douglas Murray, Sam Harris, Jordan Peterson, John McWhorter, Tom Holland, Eric Weinstein, Brett Weinstein, Heather Heying, Louise Perry, and Mary Harrington to name some.

<sup>51</sup> Revelation 14:6

<sup>52</sup> European countries are already banning transgender therapy and surgery for minors as more long-term studies show its effects. It is not difficult to imagine the same happening in America at some point. See Ghorayshi, Azeen, “England Overhauls Medical Care for Transgender Youth,” *The New York Times*, 28 Jul. 2022, [www.nytimes.com/2022/07/28/health/transgender-youth-uk-tavistock.html](http://www.nytimes.com/2022/07/28/health/transgender-youth-uk-tavistock.html); Ghorayshi, Azeen, “Medical Group Backs Youth Gender Treatments, but Calls for Research Review,” *The New York Times*, 3 Aug. 2023, [www.nytimes.com/2023/08/03/health/aap-gender-affirming-care-evidence-review.html](http://www.nytimes.com/2023/08/03/health/aap-gender-affirming-care-evidence-review.html)



## Our Voice in the Spiritual Realm

*[The] gospel is not a quaintly benign religious message designed to warm our hearts with heavenly affections. It is a subversive message, because if Jesus is Lord, then Caesar is not... Caesar is just a depraved parody, a divine pretender, and a despotic potentate. To believe in Jesus, to exercise trust in him, and to show obedience to him as Lord violates the loyalty oaths that citizens of Roman cities were often required to make. Paul was not proclaiming a message of otherworldly bliss as much as looking ahead to the day when Jesus would be by might what he is by right and the self-aggrandizing pseudo-deity of imperial power would be exposed as an idolatrous fraud and receive its due recompense.*

— MICHAEL BIRD<sup>53</sup>

*But in your hearts revere Christ as Lord.*

— 1 PETER 3:15

At this point, some may have accusations of quietism queued up. Others may be ready to prophetically author a story similar William Shirer's "Luther to Hitler" thesis,<sup>54</sup> drawing a straight line between a Lutheran propensity to keep politics out of the pulpit and some future form of totalitarianism.

However, if our goal in the spiritual realm really is far more ambitious than to "make America slightly Christian-ish again,"<sup>55</sup> not less, it requires us to be more outspoken in matters that will sound political, not less. It requires us to do so, however, at a level that is much deeper than the level at which most political discourse takes place. No matter how the sides in a specific cultural battle form, the gospel will subvert the cherished presuppositions hiding in both trenches, not just one or the other.<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>53</sup> Bird 128

<sup>54</sup> The thesis was advanced in Shirer's 1959 book, *The Rise and Fall of the Third Reich*. It was rebutted by Uwe Siemon-Netto in his 2007 book, *The Fabricated Luther: Refuting Nazi Connections and Other Modern Myths*.

<sup>55</sup> Bird 118

<sup>56</sup> Throughout the essay, mention of two sides of an issue should not be equated with our nation's two main political parties. In today's cultural battles, alliances do not neatly follow party lines. Sometimes alliances form along regional lines, racial lines, generational lines, or socioeconomic lines. The way the culture divides on pandemic policies is not the way it divides on racial equality is not the way it divides on abortion is not the way it divides on immigration policy is not the way it divides on sex and gender issues.

## AMERICA'S NEW RELIGIONS

Much of what comes from our pulpits may be perceived as political because much of politics has become very religious. This is nothing new.<sup>57</sup> In fact, it was foretold<sup>58</sup> and to some degree is inevitable.<sup>59</sup> As more and more people turn away from traditional, institutional forms of spirituality, they inevitably look elsewhere to satisfy their spiritual needs. The so-called Nones and the Spiritual-but-not-Religious (SBNR) crowd may no longer be going to church, but they are pursuing meaning, purpose, community, and ritual in a variety of new and creative ways.<sup>60</sup> Thus a person in our day may express what can only be described as zealot-like devotion and be just as likely to be talking about their CrossFit box as their local church.<sup>61</sup>

The migration of people's religious impulses that can happen in individual and idiosyncratic ways can also happen across an entire society.

[R]eligious and theological ideas...have merely migrated within society, moving away from God and attaching themselves to other ideas and institutions (primarily the nation state)...What we mistake for secularization is religion going undercover.<sup>62</sup>

In response to this phenomenon, it has become quite common to speak dismissively about a system of thought by calling it a religion.<sup>63</sup> In order to criticize any secular ideology, one simply needs to identify its version of various religious elements: original sin, enlightenment path, purification rites, sacraments, priestly class, credal statements, and tests of orthodoxy.<sup>64</sup> The fact that this type of analysis is common to the point of becoming cliché does not mean it is inaccurate. During

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<sup>57</sup> "Historically speaking, our situation is...familiar because as the overt presence of Christianity fades in society we are returning to the position occupied by Christians in the late Roman Empire: a marginal minority viewed with suspicion and considered a danger to social cohesion. We are all in the Roman Empire now" (Watkin 526).

<sup>58</sup> In Revelation 13, the beast out of the sea that represents earthly government acts in his alliance with Satan not by governing temporal affairs in an evil, unjust way, but by speaking blasphemies against God (v. 5) and getting the people of the earth to make it the object of their worship (vv. 4,8).

<sup>59</sup> "If your ultimate meaning is derived from religion, you have less need of deriving it from politics or ideology or trusting entirely in a single, secular leader. It's only when your meaning has been secured that you can allow politics to be merely procedural" (Sullivan).

<sup>60</sup> See Tara Isabella Burton's *Strange Rites: New Religions for a Godless World* for a survey of a broad kaleidoscope of modern religions. She covers everything from Harry Potter fan fiction to SoulCycle to Pepe-Kekism. She warns that "the refractory nature of these new intuitional religions—each one, at its core, a religion of the self—risks creating an increasingly balkanized American culture: one in which our desire for personal authenticity and experiential fulfillment takes precedent over our willingness to build coherent ideological systems and functional, sustainable institutions. When we are all our own high priests, who is willing to kneel?" (34).

<sup>61</sup> "My CrossFit box is everything to me. I've met my boyfriend and some of my very best friends through CrossFit. When my boyfriend and I started apartment hunting this spring, we immediately zeroed in on the neighborhood closest to our box—even though it would increase our commute to work. We did this because we couldn't bear to leave our community. At our box, we have babies and little kids crawling around everywhere, and it has been an amazing experience to watch those little ones grow up. CrossFit is family, laughter, love, and community. I can't imagine my life without the people I've met through it" (Thurston and der Kuile).

<sup>62</sup> Watkin 520

<sup>63</sup> For example, see John McWhorter, *Woke Racism*; James Lindsay, *Cynical Theories*, Noah Rothman, *The Rise of the New Puritans*.

<sup>64</sup> For example, see Eberstadt.

Holy Week of 2023, when Donald Trump was indicted in New York for campaign finance violations and three Tennessee Democrats were expelled from the state legislature for disrupting proceedings, politicians and pundits from each side compared their hero(es) of choice to Jesus while simultaneously criticizing the other side for doing so.<sup>65</sup>

## THE GOSPEL AS HERESY

Because the same migration of religion into politics happens on each side of our cultural divisions, the gospel will always be subversive and heretical to both.

## LOGIC

On each side, logic is employed that rests on assumptions that are unprovable and unfalsifiable. Each has fundamentals in the religious sense of the word. One side suggests that metanarratives can't be trusted, that no knowledge is truly objective, and that language is a tool used to preserve imbalances of power. Thus, the accusation is made:

Social Justice Theorists have created a new religion, a tradition of faith that is actively hostile to reason, falsification, disconfirmation, and disagreement of any kind..., which sees mysterious *worldly* forces in systems of power and privilege, and which sanctifies victimhood. This, increasingly, is the fundamentalist religion of the nominally secular left.<sup>66</sup>

Another side insists objective truth exists, that it can be ascertained by unencumbered human reason and the perpetual application of the scientific method, and that words mean things. Thus, the accusation is made:

Seduced by scientism, distracted by materialism, insulated, like no humans before us, from the vicissitudes of sickness and the ubiquity of early death, the post-Christian West believes instead in something we have called progress...as a substitute in many ways for our previous monotheism... In this respect, Steven Pinker is one of the most religious writers I've ever admired. His faith in reason is as complete as any fundamentalist's belief in God.<sup>67</sup>

In contrast to both, the good news of Christianity is not that human beings are perfectly rational nor hopelessly biased. It is not that the scientific method and the use of language are absolutely reliable nor incurably flawed. It's that God makes the

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<sup>65</sup> Klepper, David. "Trump arrest prompts Jesus comparisons: 'Spiritual warfare,'" *Associated Press*, 5 Apr. 2023, [apnews.com/article/donald-trump-arraignment-jesus-christ-conspiracy-theory-670c45bd71b3466dcd6e8e188badcd1d](https://apnews.com/article/donald-trump-arraignment-jesus-christ-conspiracy-theory-670c45bd71b3466dcd6e8e188badcd1d); Kornick, Lindsay. "3 Dems facing expulsion after storming state house compared to 'when 3 were crucified' on Good Friday on MSNBC," *Fox News*, [www.foxnews.com/media/3-dems-facing-expulsion-storming-state-house-compared-3-crucified-good-friday-msnbc](https://www.foxnews.com/media/3-dems-facing-expulsion-storming-state-house-compared-3-crucified-good-friday-msnbc)

<sup>66</sup> Pluckrose and Lindsay 210-211, emphasis original

<sup>67</sup> Sullivan

challenge of revealing divine truth to human beings “*his* problem.”<sup>68</sup> The gospel utilizes Logic made flesh.<sup>69</sup>

## SPECTACLE

For each side, logic is reinforced through spectacle. These symbols of a regime’s greatness are as old as the tower the people at Shinar built in order to make a name for themselves.<sup>70</sup> For one side, the spectacles reinforce the logic of capitalism and the rule of law: F-22 flyovers at football games and Apple stores built to resemble ancient temples.<sup>71</sup> Thus, the accusation is made: “The only forms of shared cultural ‘liturgy’ that remain are celebrations of the liberal state and the liberal market. National holidays have become occasions for shopping, and shopping holy days such as ‘Black Friday’ have become national holidays.”<sup>72</sup>

For another side, the spectacles seek to undermine social norms and to replace them with the logic of expressive individualism and excess: the Fattylympics,<sup>73</sup> RuPaul’s *Drag Race*, and the recent blockbuster *Barbie* (the last two of which may have more in common than one might think<sup>74</sup>). It is spectacle in service of parody politics, where the goal is to “make the incoherence of rigid categories...obvious—if not ridiculous.”<sup>75</sup>

In contrast to both, the logic of Christianity is not reinforced through spectacle that is either family-friendly or deliberately NSFW.<sup>76</sup> Rather it is reinforced through what the French call *détournement*, the tactic of taking “some part of the society of the spectacle, and changing it to give a different message to the one it was originally intended to convey.”<sup>77</sup> The symbol at the very center of the gospel is the ultimate counter spectacle. Rome used crucifixion to guarantee any potential threat to its power would never be heard from nor thought of again. Nevertheless, “with a delicious divine irony the crucifixion of Jesus Christ is now the single event most widely known to have taken place during the entire history of Rome.”<sup>78</sup> Rather than making a name for himself with a tower that reached the heavens, Jesus said, “I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself.”<sup>79</sup>

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<sup>68</sup> Watkin 332, emphasis original

<sup>69</sup> John 1:14

<sup>70</sup> Genesis 11:4. For a discussion of Babel and Augustine’s concept of *spectacle*, see Watkin 213ff.

<sup>71</sup> Laskow, Sarah. “We Asked a Cultural Historian: Are Apple Stores the New Temples?” *Atlas Obscura*, 25 Sep. 2015, [www.atlasobscura.com/articles/we-asked-a-cultural-historian-are-apple-stores-the-new-temples](http://www.atlasobscura.com/articles/we-asked-a-cultural-historian-are-apple-stores-the-new-temples)

<sup>72</sup> Deneen 65-66

<sup>73</sup> Foster, Jill. “The Roly-poly Olympics! The torch was an ice-cream cone, the medals doughnuts and the contestants, well, a little on the plump side - but they WERE game for a laugh,” *Daily Mail*, 9 Jul. 2012, [www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2170666/Fattylympics-The-Roly-poly-Olympics-Contestants-WERE-game-laugh.html](http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2170666/Fattylympics-The-Roly-poly-Olympics-Contestants-WERE-game-laugh.html)

<sup>74</sup> According to Heather Heying, who attended both in the same week, “The similarities were striking.” Heying, Heather. “You Go Girl,” *Natural Selections*, 25 Jul. 2023, [naturalselections.substack.com/p/you-go-girl](http://naturalselections.substack.com/p/you-go-girl)

<sup>75</sup> The term parody politics originates with Judith Butler (Lindsay 102–104).

<sup>76</sup> Not Safe for Work

<sup>77</sup> Watkin 215

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid* 129

<sup>79</sup> John 12:32. “This is the ultimate in ambush marketing, the *détournement* to end all *détournements*: in the hands of God the ultimate symbol of merciless, torturing power is subverted to become the worldwide cypher of self-giving love. When Christ is ‘lifted up’ on the cross, like and so

## POWER

For each side, its interests can only be fought for, won, and preserved through coercive power. One side alleges that the working poor are exploited by the bougie, upper middle class, vulnerable consumers are defrauded by greedy corporations, and women and minorities are oppressed by the white, heteronormative patriarchy. Another side alleges that citizens are censored by Big Tech overlords, elections are rigged by a cabal of coastal elites, and straight white men are the real victims in the gynocracy.<sup>80</sup> In either case, the oppressed desire to become oppressors and to turn their oppressors into the new oppressed. Thus, the accusation is made about both: “The power of this cycle of retribution is in remaking the injured in the image of the injurer.”<sup>81</sup>

In contrast, Christ established his kingdom absent coercive power. In Christ, God demonstrated that his power is different from the world’s not simply in degree but in kind. His power looks every bit like weakness.<sup>82</sup> “Christ, when it is his turn to be injured, refuses to be remade.”<sup>83</sup>

## ALLEGIANCE

Lastly, all each side expects from its adherents is full, unconditional loyalty – “complete devotion to the state and the elimination of any allegiance to any other intermediary entity.”<sup>84</sup> This may be the one way in which all sides are enjoying equal success. With each election cycle, more people attach their greatest hopes and fears to the vote count.

The party in power hero-worships its leaders..., and the other party turns them into hate figures. The party in power claims to be restoring American greatness; the party out of power insists that the current administration is actually deeply un-American—heretics in the holy temple of the U.S.A... [T]he country keeps cycling through savior figures, hoping each time that this one will be the One that we’ve been waiting for.<sup>85</sup>

In recent years, many Christian leaders have proven more than just reluctantly willing to tolerate the moral failings of their candidate of choice. They have wholeheartedly embraced them.<sup>86</sup> As a result, they should not be surprised that the

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unlike the tower in Genesis 11 that ‘reaches to the heavens’ (v. 4), he is the anti-Babel, the counterspectacle” (Watkin 403).

<sup>80</sup> “We live under a gynocracy—a rule by women. This may not be apparent on the surface, since men still run many things. But the governing virtues of America are feminine vices, associated with certain feminine virtues, such as empathy, fairness, and equality” (Wolfe 448).

<sup>81</sup> Watkin 405

<sup>82</sup> 1 Corinthians 1:18-25

<sup>83</sup> Watkin 405

<sup>84</sup> Deneen 60

<sup>85</sup> Douthat 270

<sup>86</sup> During and after the 2016 election, it was often said that Christians “held their noses” as they voted for Donald Trump. President of Liberty University, Jerry Falwell, Jr., said, “We’re electing a president, a commander-in-chief, not a pastor-in-chief,” and many agreed with his logic (Whitehead

Christians they lead are often more willing to change churches than political positions.<sup>87</sup> Of all the ways in which Americans' religious impulses have migrated in recent years, politics seems to be the institution Americans – Christians included – have been “godding”<sup>88</sup> most.

As a result, it may be that the most political thing a person can say is one of the simplest and oldest expressions of the faith: Jesus is Lord. It isn't one position or another on tax rates.<sup>89</sup> It isn't one position or another on immigration, foreign policy, mask mandates, fossil fuels, or gun control. It's the refusal to let any position become the reason we abandon the “gentleness and respect”<sup>90</sup> that are to characterize our speech. It's the refusal to let any political issue be worth the price of division within a congregation. It's the refusal to use apocalyptic language as we discuss election outcomes. It's the willingness to let love lead us to act one way in one situation and another in another, even if it brings accusations of inconsistency and disloyalty.<sup>91</sup>

Whether it is 2004, 2016, 2020, or 2024, “the hopes and fears of all the years”<sup>92</sup> rightfully belong only to the One whose story reduces mighty Caesar Augustus to barely more than a footnote.<sup>93</sup> Those who “revere Christ as Lord” will continue to be known as people “who have turned the world upside down.”<sup>94</sup> This, not our biblical view on any political issue, will be the way in which the following statement describing our day is most true: “To be a good Christian inevitably makes one a bad American.”<sup>95</sup>

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and Perry xi). While this reluctant willingness certainly characterized some, it was not true of all Christians. Kristin Kobes du Mez offers this assessment: “Having replaced the Jesus of the Gospels with a vengeful warrior Christ, it's no wonder many came to think of Trump in the same way. In 2016, many observers were stunned at evangelicals' apparent betrayal of their own values. In reality, evangelicals did not cast their vote despite their beliefs, but because of them” (3).

<sup>87</sup> “Somewhat surprisingly, this pattern of switching [churches] suggests that people whose religious and political affiliations are ‘inconsistent’ as judged by today's partisan alignments—that is, liberal churchgoers and unchurched conservatives—are more likely to resolve the inconsistency by changing their religion than by changing their politics” (Putnam and Campbell 145). A recent CBS News Poll found that, among Donald Trump voters, 71% of people feel that what he tells them is true. Only 42% said the same about religious leaders ([www.cbsnews.com/news/trump-poll-indictments-2023-08-20/](http://www.cbsnews.com/news/trump-poll-indictments-2023-08-20/)).

<sup>88</sup> Watkin 310

<sup>89</sup> Some political issues certainly have moral implications. Christians have not always been great, however, at differentiating between those that do and those that do not. “[Christians] should be the Republican Party's most vocal internal critics, constantly looking for places where the right-wing party line deserves correction, and constantly aware that Rush Limbaugh's take on tax policy and Donald Rumsfeld's views on waterboarding are not inscribed in the New Testament” (Douthat 285).

<sup>90</sup> 1 Peter 3:15

<sup>91</sup> 1 Corinthians 9:19ff

<sup>92</sup> *Christian Worship*, hymn 333:1

<sup>93</sup> Joel Green makes the case that Luke's mention of the emperor (along with other details from his nativity account) is designed not as much to set the historical context) as to clearly set “Jesus in religio-political opposition to the emperor” (Green 121ff).

<sup>94</sup> Acts 17:6

<sup>95</sup> Biermann 178

## Our Way in the Spiritual Realm

*[I]n the name of resisting the internal deterioration of the faith and the corruption of the world around them, many Christians—and Christian conservatives most significantly—unwittingly embrace some of the most corrosive aspects of the cultural disintegration they decry. By nurturing its resentments, sustaining them through a discourse of negation toward outsiders, and in cases, pursuing their will to power, they become functional Nietzscheans, participating in the very cultural breakdown they so ardently strive to resist.*

— JAMES DAVIDSON HUNTER<sup>96</sup>

*But even if you should suffer for what is right, you are blessed. “Do not fear what they fear; do not be frightened.”*

— 1 PETER 3:14

As previously mentioned, each side in our cultural divisions seeks to advance its cause using coercive power. Not only did Christ establish his reign in a very different way, but he also made it clear that the way for his Church would be different. Modern American Christians may have a uniquely difficult time imagining a way in which our goal in the spiritual realm can be accomplished apart from at least some power in the temporal realm. The success of the one seems tied to the other. However, Christ has proven himself more than capable of advancing his spiritual kingdom when his people have very little temporal power. In fact, the pursuit of power in the temporal realm may prove counter-productive to our goal in the spiritual realm. In other words, the Church is blessed when it suffers.

### THE PREDICTABLE PATTERN OF POWER

As a society loses the natural cohesiveness supplied by a shared set of beliefs, traditions, and rituals, something else is needed to hold that society together. “What remains to bind together [society’s] innumerable fragments? The answer, in large part, is power—the exercise of coercion or the threat of its use.”<sup>97</sup> Thus the number of laws needed to arbitrate public life goes up as societal consensus goes down.

The process by which this happens often follows a predictable pattern. It starts with someone developing a sense of injury. Whether the injury is real or perceived doesn’t really matter so long as it is felt. This sense of injury then becomes an integral part of one’s identity and forms the basis for one’s membership within

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<sup>96</sup> Hunter 175

<sup>97</sup> Hunter 101

some larger group. The injury creates solidarity among the group's members and mobilizes them to action: "the condemnation and denigration of enemies in the effort to subjugate and dominate those who are culpable."<sup>98</sup> In Nietzschean terms, injury leaves a person with one of two options: god or good, the will to power or wretched weakness, strength or slave morality.<sup>99</sup>

So, for example, those of a more conservative bent tend to value order: clearly defined family units, a strong military, secure borders, and the rule of law. The order they cherish is tied to their belief that Christianity or a Judeo-Christian worldview played a role in America's founding. As a result, injury happens when order deteriorates at the hands of secular, progressive forces and their "long march through the institutions"<sup>100</sup> of society. Everyone from the news media to Hollywood to the teachers' union to activist judges is blamed for America's moral decay. Therefore, power needs to be seized to reverse this process.<sup>101</sup>

In contrast, those of a more progressive tilt tend to value equality – for the poor, immigrants, and minorities. Their desire for equality can also be buttressed by Scripture, most notably Old Testament prophets like Amos, Micah, and Isaiah. In this case injury happens when vulnerable members of society suffer harm. Progressives lay the blame for this harm at the feet of conservatives, including conservative Christians. As a result, "the obvious solution is to seize power back from the Right."<sup>102</sup>

In the end, each side seems adept at recognizing the speck in the other's eye while ignoring the plank in their own. About the progressive side, the accusation is made:

In victimhood culture, status comes from being seen as victimized and therefore eliciting support from sympathetic third parties... As a result, it tends to read power imbalances and victimization into many interactions—and even occasionally, invents them—to exploit... "the natural moral currency of victimhood."<sup>103</sup>

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<sup>98</sup> Hunter 108

<sup>99</sup> "In the end, gods have no other choice: *either* they are the will to power—in which case they will still be the gods of a people—*or* they are powerless in the face of power, and they will necessarily become *good*" (Nietzsche, *The Anti-Christ*, 14). Quoted in Watkin 450.

<sup>100</sup> The phrase was first coined by German activist Rudi Dutschke in 1967. Its frequent use by conservatives as an explanation for what has happened to society has caused one author to label it "Longmarchism." See Chait, Jonathan. "Conservatives Have a New Master Theory of American Politics: 'The long march through the institutions' is a self-fulfilling prophecy," *New York Magazine*, 26 Jul. 2023, [nymag.com/intelligencer/2023/07/long-march-through-institutions-conservatives-rufomilikh-claremont-desantis-trump.html](https://nymag.com/intelligencer/2023/07/long-march-through-institutions-conservatives-rufomilikh-claremont-desantis-trump.html)

<sup>101</sup> Conservatives "use words and phrases like 'enemy,' 'attack,' 'drive out,' 'overthrow,' 'eradicate the Other,' 'reclaim their nations for Christ,' 'take back' influence, 'compel,' 'occupying and influencing [spheres] of power in our nations,' 'advancing the kingdom of God,' and so on." In so doing, they reflect the "language of loss, disappointment, anger, antipathy, resentment, and desire for conquest" (Hunter 131). He's quoting from an organization that promotes the "Seven Mountain Mandate," popularized by Lance Wallnau and Bill Johnson's book, *Invading Babylon: The 7 Mountain Mandate*.

<sup>102</sup> Hunter 143. Hunter quotes from Randall Balmer's *Thy Kingdom Come*, where he labels conservative Christians "'right-wing zealots' and 'bullies' and their followers 'minions,' who together are 'intolerant,' 'vicious,' 'militaristic,' 'bloviating,' and 'theocratic'" (Hunter 141).

<sup>103</sup> Pluckrose and Lindsay 229. They are quoting from Bradley Campbell and Jason Manning's *The Rise of Victimhood Culture: Microaggressions, Safe Spaces, and the New Culture Wars*. Pluckrose and Lindsay cite an example of this phenomenon in their chapter on Critical Race Theory. While social justice theorists will readily admit that race is a post-Enlightenment social construct that has very little connection with objective reality, they will also advocate for complete racial self-identification. For example, a person ought to say, "I am Black," as opposed to "I am a person who happens to be



About the conservative side, the accusation is made:

For all of its vitriol toward the secular elites—[it] borrows liberally from the play-book of the left. [It] not only redefines the nature of oppression as psychological oppression (making it easier to justify extreme measures and harder to argue things aren't as bad as they seem), [it] also rallies the troops...by reminding them they're victims... [O]ne might be forgiven for seeing [it] as a form of right-wing wokeism.<sup>104</sup>

## CHRISTIAN NIETZSCHEANS

The playbook that starts with injury and ends in conquest is easy for Christians to “unwittingly embrace” and become “functional Nietzscheans,” as Hunter suggests. Sentiments such as “Christianity is under attack,” are no less common than other expressions of injury in our day. When the currency of victimhood has a strong exchange rate, Christians can be as quick as anyone to cash it in.

Consider the previously mentioned example of the Los Angeles Dodgers and the Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence. Can one make the case that the speech and dress of the Sisters is a blight on civil society? Sure. Is this kind of needless self-immolation a sound business strategy for the club or for Major League Baseball? Likely not. Nevertheless, the public response from American Christianity didn't do the faith any favors. Not only did it come across as self-serving (the group that led the charge was called “Catholics for Catholics”), but one could be forgiven for getting the impression that a bunch of overweight men dressed as nuns posed a serious threat to a global faith that is 2,000 years old and consists of 2.5 billion members and counting.<sup>105</sup> God was at least impressed with the spectacle at Babel. He stopped them because he concluded nothing else would.<sup>106</sup> The spectacle-within-a-spectacle that occurred at Dodger Stadium probably didn't warrant the same level of concern.

Mockery of the Christian faith is nothing new.<sup>107</sup> The earliest known pictorial representation of Jesus' crucifixion was scratched into a plaster wall in Rome. The Alexamenos graffito mockingly depicted a Christian worshiping his donkey-headed deity. Had smartphones and 24-hour news networks existed in 200 A.D., are we to imagine they would have captured Christian protestors voicing their grievances on Palatine Hill?

This also leads us to ask how vocal Christians ought to be in defense of their own religious liberty. There may be a time to do so and a beneficial way to do it.

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black.” The label is not intended to define some objective characteristic of a person as much as it is used to claim an oppressed identity, one that can then be used to seize power. See 124ff where they cite Kimberlé Crenshaw's “Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color.”

<sup>104</sup> DeYoung. He is specifically reviewing Stephen Wolfe's *The Case for Christian Nationalism*.

<sup>105</sup> Earls, Aaron. “7 Encouraging Trends of Global Christianity in 2022,” *Lifeway*, 31 Jan. 2022, [research.lifeway.com/2022/01/31/7-encouraging-trends-of-global-christianity-in-2022/](https://research.lifeway.com/2022/01/31/7-encouraging-trends-of-global-christianity-in-2022/)

<sup>106</sup> Genesis 11:5-7

<sup>107</sup> The group was founded in 1979 in San Francisco. It was on Easter weekend, in fact - a helpful reminder of the ubiquity of the Nietzschean politics of negation. The group's entire existence is defined by what they are not. There is no substance beyond what they are against.

There is no doubt also a way to do so that is self-serving.<sup>108</sup> There is a way to do so that makes Christians look like whiny, entitled children. There is a way to do so that does no favors to our gospel witness. After all, who would want to be part of a community that makes people so fragile and so thoroughly depends on the constant care of a magnanimous State?

If nothing else, we must not confuse our right to the free exercise of religion with “pseudo-rights like the right not to be offended.”<sup>109</sup> The self-infantilization often found on our nation’s college campuses<sup>110</sup> should not be found in its houses of worship. “[I]n the theater of political rhetoric...you will undoubtedly hear offensive statements. Grown-ups are able to deal with it.”<sup>111</sup> If grown-ups can deal with it, how much more so kings of the King and lords of the Lord?<sup>112</sup>

### THE SUBVERSIVE POWER OF SUBMISSION

In place of the predictable pattern of power, Christians have been given an entirely different pattern to follow. It is not one where victims stew in the misery of their victimhood, nor where they parlay the currency of victimhood to purchase power. There is another pattern besides the false choice Nietzsche would hand us.<sup>113</sup>

Our pattern is cruciform and takes its cue from the Crucified.<sup>114</sup> The submission and suffering that is our exilic birthright<sup>115</sup> should not be confused with weakness or a cowardly accommodation to the politics of brute force. It is not Marx’s “opiate of the masses.” Instead, it is what has been called “a revolutionary way of being revolutionary.”<sup>116</sup>

The cross is not a sign of the church’s quiet, suffering submission to the powers-

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<sup>108</sup> “The church should never champion or lobby for the preservation of its own ‘first amendment rights.’ To do so would ultimately diminish the church’s identity, trivialize its proclamation, and reduce it to the level of every other self-focused human institution. In the face of the erosion of privilege and the restriction or removal of ‘rights,’ fear of dire repercussions for the church or her people must not prevail and be allowed to shape the church’s course of action. The consequent penalties and persecution that could be imposed on the church that refuses to compromise its confession and practice may appear to be devastating and insurmountable. But as history amply attests, God’s provision for his church always overwhelmingly surpasses all human and demonic effort to quash and crush it—no matter how punitive or violent” (Biermann 173).

<sup>109</sup> Bird 104

<sup>110</sup> See Shulevitz, Judith. “In College and Hiding from Scary Ideas,” 21 Mar. 2015, [www.nytimes.com/2015/03/22/opinion/sunday/judith-shulevitz-hiding-from-scary-ideas.html](http://www.nytimes.com/2015/03/22/opinion/sunday/judith-shulevitz-hiding-from-scary-ideas.html)

<sup>111</sup> Bird 105

<sup>112</sup> Revelation 19:16. “This does not refer to Jesus’ rule over the worldly kings mentioned in verse 18. This name means Jesus is the King and Lord of the saints. Believers are the kings for whom Jesus is the King. We are the lords who will serve the Lord forever. We share in his final judgment and eternal rule” (Mueller, Wayne. *The People’s Bible: Revelation*, 189).

<sup>113</sup> “What Nietzsche does not, or cannot, conceive of is a strength not despite weakness but in weakness, a nonlinear glory. In humility and leadership in service. Philippians 2 presents no slave morality” (Watkin 450).

<sup>114</sup> Matthew 16:21–26; Mark 8:31–38; Luke 9:21–27

<sup>115</sup> 1 Peter 1:6; 2:13, 18–25; 3:1, 7, 9, 13–17; 4:1, 4, 12–19; 5:5–9

<sup>116</sup> Watkin 20, quoting both Os Guinness and N. T. Wright

that-be, but rather the church's revolutionary participation in the victory of Christ over those powers... [T]he cross is a sign of what happens when one takes God's account of reality more seriously than Caesar's.<sup>117</sup>

The pattern of the cross demonstrates that we do not fear what the world fears most. Whether it be state-sanctioned persecution or social-media-driven scorn, what terrifies so many brings no terror to us. As a result, we may go out of our way to protect others from what they fear while allowing ourselves to be subject to it because we do not. "[T]he glory of the gospel will be most evident if Christians show more concern for their neighbors' rights than for their own and if they are willing to suffer for their beliefs without complaint."<sup>118</sup>

In contrast to a fragile, fearful concern for state-protected freedoms, our cruciform lives give clear witness to the Crucified. They show the world that the Church's survival does not require Caesar's help. They demonstrate that Christians are a people "who see clearly the cost of discipleship and are willing to pay the price."<sup>119</sup>

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<sup>117</sup> Hauerwas 47

<sup>118</sup> Williams 161

<sup>119</sup> Hauerwas 48

## Our Outcome in the Spiritual Realm

*Time and time again, the Faith has to all appearance gone to the dogs. But each time, it was the dog that died.*

– G.K. CHESTERTON<sup>120</sup>

*But to those who do not believe, “The stone the builders rejected has become the cornerstone,” and, “A stone that causes people to stumble and a rock that makes them fall.”*

– 1 PETER 2:7–8

There will, of course, be times at which the survival of Christ’s Church appears to be in jeopardy. As the Church’s life traces the cruciform pattern set by the Church’s Lord, however, it can be certain of its outcome. The Stone God has chosen to build with will always appear malformed. So-called experts will always deem it worthless. Because of the empty tomb, however, that Stone *has become* the cornerstone. Many will make it the foundation of their lives and eternities. Others will stumble over it. No one will be able to sidestep it, however. It is here to stay.

As a result, Christians can confess the Third Article of the Creed in a way that differs slightly from how we primarily understand and teach it. We “believe in...the Holy Christian Church” in the sense that we believe it exists even though it is invisible. On the basis of God’s promises and the Crucified’s resurrection, however, we believe in it in another sense too. We have confidence in it. We take God at his Word when he says it is indestructible.<sup>121</sup> In spite of what our eyes tell us, we know that it cannot be shaken. Christianity is under attack in the same way that, when a gnat lands on the outermost wall surrounding Fort Knox, our nation’s gold bullion depository is under attack. As we carry out our work in Christ’s spiritual realm, we must never give up our “faith in Christian faith.”<sup>122</sup>

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<sup>120</sup> Chesterton’s words are often paraphrased this way. The full original quotation comes from *Everlasting Man*: “At least five times, therefore, with the Arian and the Albigensian, with the Humanist sceptic, after Voltaire and after Darwin, the Faith has to all appearance gone to the dogs. In each of these five cases it was the dog that died.”

<sup>121</sup> Matthew 16:17–18

<sup>122</sup> Douthat 53. Lutheran theologian Hermann Sasse assessed the situation in early 20th Century Germany this way: “Since the 19th Century the cultured German—and this is true of the members of other nations as well—believes in his nation as he should believe in the Church of God. Faith in the Church is for him an entirely theoretical matter. Faith in his nation is a matter of vital concern. ‘Thou shalt believe in Germany’s future, in the resurrection of your nation.’ This was actually the tacit Third Article in the years between World Wars I and II; it was the faith also of Lutheran Germans” (Sasse 8).

## THE REVOLUTION IS COMPLETE

That doesn't prevent people from occasionally trying to play the role of Christianity's coroner. Legend has it that, in a heated dispute with a Catholic cardinal, Napoleon threatened, "Your eminence, are you not aware that I have the power to destroy the church?" The cardinal, the story goes, responded, "Your majesty, we, the clergy, have done our best to destroy the church for the last 1800 years. We have not succeeded, and neither will you."<sup>123</sup>

More recently, John Lennon famously said, "Christianity will go. It will vanish and shrink. I needn't argue about that; I'm right and I will be proved right. We're more popular than Jesus now."<sup>124</sup> Unfortunately, the reaction from American Bible Belt Christians did not exude the same confidence as the French Catholic clerics. When Lennon's words were published stateside, on-air bannings, record smashings, and album burnings ensued. The mop-topped foursome seemed to stay more cool-headed throughout the process than American Christians did.<sup>125</sup>

Perhaps Christians could have just waited for (or tried to prevent) the inevitable stumbling destined to be the fate of anyone who attempts to sidestep the Cornerstone.<sup>126</sup> While Lennon and company were trying to sever society from its Christian roots, they were very much trafficking in Christian rhetoric and values even if unknowingly. Songs like "All You Need Is Love" and "Imagine" promoted the same wretchedly weak, goodie-goodie, slave morality for which Nietzsche criticized Christianity. The fact that "Imagine" became the "anthem of atheism" would have caused "Nietzsche [to spin] furiously in his grave."<sup>127</sup>

On the back of this so-called revolution,<sup>128</sup> efforts like 1985's "Live Aid" concerts were held to offer relief to those suffering from famine in Ethiopia. It was rather hypocritical that "[m]usicians who had spent their careers variously bedding groupies and snorting coke off trays balanced on the heads of dwarves played sets in aid of the starving."<sup>129</sup> It was also hopelessly naïve. "That charity should be offered to the needy, and that a stranger in a foreign land was no less a brother or sister than was a next-door neighbour, were principles that had always been fundamental to the Christian message."<sup>130</sup>

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<sup>123</sup> The legend is recounted in various places, including Dreher 49, Taylor Marshall's *Infiltration: The Plot to Destroy the Church from Within* and Douthat, Ross. "A Time for Contrition," *New York Times*, 28 Mar. 2010, [www.nytimes.com/2010/03/29/opinion/29douthat.html](http://www.nytimes.com/2010/03/29/opinion/29douthat.html)

<sup>124</sup> Lennon's words were first published in the March 4, 1966, edition of the *London Evening Standard*.

<sup>125</sup> Spangler, Jay. "John Lennon Interview: London Evening Standard, 'More Popular Than Jesus' 3/4/1966," *Beatles Interviews*, [www.beatlesinterviews.org/db1966.0304-beatles-john-lennon-were-more-popular-than-jesus-now-maureen-cleave.html](http://www.beatlesinterviews.org/db1966.0304-beatles-john-lennon-were-more-popular-than-jesus-now-maureen-cleave.html)

<sup>126</sup> 1 Peter 2:9

<sup>127</sup> Holland 496

<sup>128</sup> Readers will have to follow Lennon's lead and simply "imagine" the letters e-v-o-l reversed to spell l-o-v-e.

<sup>129</sup> Holland 497

<sup>130</sup> Ibid 498. Seven months prior to the Live Aid concerts, a group of stars dubbed Band Aid had recorded "Do They Know It's Christmas?" with the same goal of raising money for famine relief. Though the effort might be considered successful and even noble, no one needed to ask whether they knew it was Christmas in Africa. In 1984, the year the song was recorded, there were 250 million Christians in Africa, up from 10 million in 1900. "Any notion that the Ethiopians might never have heard of Christmas was worse than mistaken—it was grotesque" (Holland 500).

Meanwhile the world occasionally gets a glimpse of what a true break from Christianity – fruits *and* roots – really looks like. In the mid-2010s, the Islamic State filled a power vacuum in the Middle East with the goal of returning modern Islam to what its members considered its ruthless and conquest-driven origins. They, not the “all you need is love” and “give peace a chance” crowd, were Nietzsche’s true heirs.<sup>131</sup> Their crusade to take the cross back from Christianity culminated in late 2014 when members published a series of videos showing gruesome executions, including one of the beheading of American journalist James Foley. The four masked men in the videos came to be known as Paul, John, George, and Ringo – The Beatles. Foley’s executioner was referred to in media headlines as “Jihadi John.” Of course, Lennon was not around to learn what would have been for him a surprising and unwelcome lesson: that the true antithesis to the peace, love, and living-as-one he imagined was not the Christianity he dismissed. To the contrary, there can’t be one without the other. Absent Christianity’s influence, “Jihadi John” is all that’s left.

This is one of dozens of similar historical webs author Tom Holland weaves in support of the central thesis of his book: “So profound has been the impact of Christianity on the development of Western civilization that it has come to be hidden from view. It is the incomplete revolutions which are remembered; the fate of those which triumph is to be taken for granted.”<sup>132</sup>

Holland’s claim is true of the logic and virtues that the world embraces that Christians may, to some degree, embrace along with them. Virtues such as love, empathy, and compassion have been learned by our society to such a degree that they can hardly be unlearned.

In the same way that when we approach a chair, our minds and muscles experience it as something to be sat upon rather than just an angular object of unknown use, ... so also the biblical ethic...has stamped the ethos of Christian-influenced cultures... In our culture we cannot but experience a chair as to-be-sat-upon; ...[and] we cannot but experience the poor as to-be-helped, boasting as to-be-avoided, and wealth [as] to-be-used for the benefit of others.<sup>133</sup>

This is also true of logic and virtues that would appear to challenge Christianity. The rhetoric and values of secular modernity, ostensibly opposed to Christianity, ultimately find their basis in Christian thought. The concept of secularism itself has no foundation other than the Christian theology that can be traced back to Augustine’s two cities and Luther’s two kingdoms.

Claiming to have chased religion from its home, the secular has moved in and kept all the furniture. The secular is built on the assumption that there are two domains—the religious and the secular—and that one can grow as the other shrinks...

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<sup>131</sup> “Like Nietzsche, the Islamic State saw in the pieties of Western civilisation—its concern for the suffering, its prating about human rights—a source of terrible and sickly power...[T]hey understood that the surest blow they could strike against it was a display of exultant and unapologetic cruelty. The cross had to be redeemed from Christianity” (Holland 511-512).

<sup>132</sup> Holland 17

<sup>133</sup> Watkin 389

Furthermore, when secularism fights against religion it does so with religion's own weapons, using Christian moral intuitions of universality, individuality, conscience, freedom, equality, and reciprocity.<sup>134</sup>

The same modern society that seems so hostile to the faith is still “soaked, seeped, and cask-aged” in Christian thought.<sup>135</sup> The revolution is complete. “When all is said and done, Christianity has no competition.”<sup>136</sup>

## CONVICTION DEFICIT DISORDERS

This belief in the Holy Christian Church – this faith in Christian faith – enables us to carry out our work in Christ's spiritual kingdom with confidence. It keeps us from unintentionally administering self-inflicted wounds that can easily result whenever Christians suffer from a “conviction deficit.”<sup>137</sup>

## RESISTANCE

One such conviction deficit disorder takes the form of resistance. Resistance as a social strategy is nothing new, but the development of resistance as a social subculture (i.e. “The Resistance”) picked up steam following the 2016 election.<sup>138</sup> It is often wed to witchcraft and other occultic elements.<sup>139</sup> It provides individuals with a sense of empowerment against otherwise invincible adversaries.

In contrast, Christians can view false religions and irreligious ideologies not as forces that need our own version of “The Resistance,” but as forces against which

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<sup>134</sup> Ibid 524. See also Holland: “The great claim of what, in 1846, an English newspaper editor first termed ‘secularism’ was to neutrality. Yet this was a conceit. Secularism was not a neutral concept. The very word came trailing incense clouds of meaning that were irrevocably and venerably Christian. That there existed twin dimensions, the secular and the religious, was an assumption that reached back centuries beyond the Reformation: to Gregory VII, and to Columbanus, and to Augustine. The concept of secularism—for all that it was promoted by the editor who invented the word as an antidote to religion—testified not to Christianity's decline, but to its seemingly infinite capacity for evolution” (427).

<sup>135</sup> Watkin 526

<sup>136</sup> Biermann 179

<sup>137</sup> Douthat uses the phrase to explain the failed efforts of liberal mainline Protestant churches to stay relevant by accommodating to the late 20th century's social revolutions. “[G]enuine mysticism ultimately depends on genuine belief, and it often seemed that all of these efforts were just so much ‘play’...with little connection to actual conviction. It was this conviction deficit, above all, that explains the failure of accommodationist churches to keep believers in their pews. Their pastors and theologians had recognized, correctly, that the old foundations of Christianity were being undercut by the social revolutions of their era. Yet they had failed to identify any new foundation that could inspire real piety, real allegiance, real belief” (108).

<sup>138</sup> After Trump's election, #Resist and #TheResistance became popular on social media platforms. The movement adopted the logo of the Rebel alliance in the *Star Wars* films. As an informal movement, it perhaps culminated with the then-anonymous op-ed from an official in Trump's Department of Homeland Security published in *The New York Times*: “I Am Part of the Resistance Inside the Trump Administration: I work for the president but like-minded colleagues and I have vowed to thwart parts of his agenda and his worst inclinations,” 5 Sep 2018, [www.nytimes.com/2018/09/05/opinion/trump-white-house-anonymous-resistance.html](http://www.nytimes.com/2018/09/05/opinion/trump-white-house-anonymous-resistance.html)

<sup>139</sup> Burton 115ff

Christianity is irresistible. As Christians combat the influences that war against our souls, we may be tempted to employ the same tactics and apply the same rules of engagement that are used against Christianity.<sup>140</sup> Doing so, however, assumes that the two opponents squaring off in the ring are equally matched and that the playing field needs to be even for the fight to be fair. This is not the case, however. In fact, Christians may even concede that other religions need certain protections Christianity does not. When other religions appear to be treated more gently and afforded more accommodation, we might just wear it as a badge of honor rather than using it as a reason to voice our grievance.<sup>141</sup>

## RELEVANCE

Other self-inflicted wounds might be administered in pursuit of relevance. Rather than resisting cultural changes, many mainline Protestant denominations have long tried to stay relevant by accommodating to those changes. This has proven to be anything but a winning strategy. The data showing that progressive, liberal Christian churches have fared much worse than more traditional, conservative ones makes perfect sense. “Why would you need to wash down your left-wing convictions with a draft of Communion wine, when you could take the activism straight and do something else with your weekend?”<sup>142</sup>

Relevance can be pursued in more ways than one, however. Churches reluctant to accommodate doctrine might instead accommodate practice. For this segment of Christianity, “the main point of reference in defining itself as a movement and its main focus of critique is not contemporary culture but the established church.”<sup>143</sup> For “The Resistance,” the message from the pulpit is, “What’s wrong with our world is...” For what might be called “The Relevance,” the message from the pulpit is, “What’s wrong with the Church is...”

Thus, one can find an endless number of books and blog articles that apply lessons from the corporate world to the modern church. For example, a recent blog article sought to analyze the experience of the online car sales company Carvana during the Covid-19 pandemic. The article was entitled, “The Carvana Lesson.” Readers of the article discovered a bit of a surprise, however. There was no lesson. The author was certain some lesson existed and that the church needed to learn it but concluded it was still too early to tell what it was.<sup>144</sup> Churches can certainly learn lessons from the corporate world. If it must be the case that one hopes to discover the secret ingredient of the other, however, executives in boardrooms the

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<sup>140</sup> See, for example, Mettler Zachary. “Kirk Cameron to Host ‘See You at the Library’ on Saturday for Americans to Pray, Sing and Read” *Daily Citizen*, 4 Aug. 2023, [dailycitizen.focusonthefamily.com/kirk-cameron-to-host-see-you-at-the-library-on-saturday-for-americans-to-pray-sing-and-read/](https://dailycitizen.focusonthefamily.com/kirk-cameron-to-host-see-you-at-the-library-on-saturday-for-americans-to-pray-sing-and-read/)

<sup>141</sup> See, for example, Tremoglie, Christopher. “MLB wouldn’t have invited drag queen group if it mocked any religion other than Christianity,” *Washington Examiner*, 6 Jun. 2023, [www.washingtonexaminer.com/opinion/mlb-wouldnt-have-invited-drag-queen-group-if-it-mocked-any-religion-other-than-christianity](https://www.washingtonexaminer.com/opinion/mlb-wouldnt-have-invited-drag-queen-group-if-it-mocked-any-religion-other-than-christianity)

<sup>142</sup> Douthat 109

<sup>143</sup> Hunter 216

<sup>144</sup> “[W]e’re still sorting all of this out. But the lesson of Carvana is clear: We should be intent on sorting it out.” James Emery White. “The Carvana Lesson,” *Church & Culture*, 28 Nov. 2022, [www.churchandculture.org/blog/2022/11/28/the-carvana-lesson](https://www.churchandculture.org/blog/2022/11/28/the-carvana-lesson)



world over should be trying to figure out “The Holy Christian Church Lesson” rather than the other way around.

Aside from some of the more obvious dangers of an unhealthy obsession with relevance,<sup>145</sup> one wonders about its wisdom at a time when “[i]t is not just that Christians are irrelevant to the culture, but they are vilified by the culture.”<sup>146</sup> In addition, we may inadvertently leave people wondering why they would want to be part of something that seems so unconvinced of its own importance.

## RETREAT

Still other self-inflicted wounds might be administered by a strategy of retreat. Lutherans who take their theology seriously might be tempted to equate Luther’s doctrine of two kingdoms with Jefferson’s wall of separation between church and state. Knowing that we will never meet the world’s moral standards, we might convince ourselves that separation will spare us from the world’s ire. Such hope is proving to be more foolish with each passing year. Christians don’t need to go looking for crosses, but they won’t be able to avoid them either. In the process of trying, we end up treating our faith the way its opponents do, “the equivalent of intellectual pornography, a dirty and disgusting thing that people should be allowed to do only in the privacy of their own homes or in the seclusion of houses of worship.”<sup>147</sup>

Abraham Lincoln once said, “If destruction be our lot, we must ourselves be its author and finisher... [W]e must live through all time, or die by suicide.”<sup>148</sup> Lincoln was not speaking about God’s “holy nation” but about the “nation of free men” founded in 1776. Nevertheless, the confidence he had in our nation’s founding principles led him to conclude it could be torn down only by the hands of its own citizens. While Christ’s promise that his Church will live through all time does not guarantee the future of the church in our place and time, it may be the case that the deepest wounds American Christianity has endured have been self-inflicted. If a free nation ought to have faith in its founding principles, God’s holy nation ought to have faith in its foundational Stone. Far more than anyone has reason to believe in the United States of America, we believe in the Holy Christian Church.

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<sup>145</sup> “One cannot emphasize enough how ‘celebrity’ and ‘spectacle’ permeate these initiatives” (Hunter 217). Cautionary tales abound.

<sup>146</sup> Hunter 217

<sup>147</sup> Bird 42

<sup>148</sup> Quoted in Packer 5



{ PART 2 }

# Our Sempiternal, Subversive, Submissive Life in the Tem- poral Realm

OUR GOAL IN THE TEMPORAL REALM 31  
OUR VOICE IN THE TEMPORAL REALM 37  
OUR WAY IN THE TEMPORAL REALM 49

## Our Goal in the Temporal Realm

*[The early Christian church] 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... [T]he community did not seek to exert social or political pressure, but to give public witness to a new way of life.*

— MIROSLAV VOLF<sup>149</sup>

*Do not repay evil with evil or insult with insult. On the contrary, repay evil with blessing, because to this you were called so that you may inherit a blessing. For,*

*“Whoever would love life  
and see good days  
must keep their tongue from evil  
and their lips from deceitful speech.  
They must turn from evil and do good;  
they must seek peace and pursue it.*

— 1 PETER 3:9–11

Christians are exiles by virtue of their birth into citizenship in Christ's spiritual kingdom. In that kingdom our goal as citizens is clear and unchanging. We declare God's praises that those who presently are not part of Christ's holy nation might be.

Our status as exiles does not erase our citizenship in Christ's temporal kingdom. The privileges and obligations of citizenship in that temporal kingdom have not expired simply because we have a new citizenship in a spiritual realm. And unlike our goal in Christ's spiritual kingdom, our goal in Christ's temporal kingdom can be a bit of a moving target.

### **HARDENED HEARTS, A PERMISSIVE STATE, AND SOCIETAL PEACE**

Of course, we could very easily craft the perfect social agenda for the temporal realm. We could outline a platform plank by plank that would result in the greatest possible flourishing for society. Our ability to do so comes from our knowledge of God's moral law as revealed in his holy Word. We know that not everyone in the temporal realm has this Word nor regards it as holy. That doesn't make our goal impossible, however. God's moral law is also written on our hearts.<sup>150</sup> On the basis

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<sup>149</sup> Volf 20

<sup>150</sup> Romans 2:14–15

of natural law, we are still able to order life in the temporal realm with just laws, relying on the state to wield its God-given sword to enforce them.<sup>151</sup>

The chapter in the Bible that tells us about natural law is immediately preceded, however, by the one that tells us how adept mankind is at suppressing the truth that God has made plain. In fact, this initially difficult task eventually takes no effort at all. In time, God's wrath is revealed as he gives people over to their denial of his truth.<sup>152</sup> As clear as God's moral law is, people can still become "darkened in their understanding...because of the ignorance that is in them due to the hardening of their hearts."<sup>153</sup>

What then? What is the goal for the ordering of society when people's hearts are hard? The biblical answer to that question doesn't come out of a realm ruled by one of Daniel's four beasts.<sup>154</sup> It comes from within the theocratic borders of God's people. When people's hearts are hard, the state's legislative pen (even when it is in the hands of God's prophet) may permit something God forbids for the sake of societal order.<sup>155</sup> When hearts are hard, the temporal realm's goal posts move. It is a worthy goal to work for an ordering of society that conforms to God's moral law. It is also a worthy goal to work for an ordering of society in which people can live at peace with one another. The more people's hearts are hardened to God's law, the more those two goals will not perfectly align.

In his commentary on Psalm 82, Luther envisioned four scenarios in which preachers of God's Word might disrupt the stability of societal order.<sup>156</sup> Most pertinent for our purposes is the third of these scenarios, one where "in a parish, a city, or a principality, the papists and the Lutherans...are crying out against one another because of certain matters of belief, and preaching against one another, and both parties claim that the Scriptures are on their side." In such a scenario, Luther advised:

I would not willingly tolerate such a division. My Lutherans ought to be willing to abdicate and be silent if they observed that they were not gladly heard, as Christ teaches (Matt. 10:14). They ought to have themselves compelled to preach, as I am... It is not a good thing that contradictory preaching should go out among the people of the same parish. For from this arise divisions, disorders, hatreds, and envyings which extend to temporal affairs also.<sup>157</sup>

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<sup>151</sup> Romans 13:3-4

<sup>152</sup> Romans 1:24, 26, 28

<sup>153</sup> Ephesians 4:18

<sup>154</sup> Daniel 7

<sup>155</sup> Mark 10:5

<sup>156</sup> See *Luther's Works*, vol. 13, pp. 61ff. In the first scenario, preachers were calling for rebellion against earthly rulers. Luther's solution: "These teachers are immediately, and without doubt, to be punished by the rulers, as men who are resisting temporal law and government (Rom. 13:1, 2)." In the second scenario, preachers were teaching a message contrary to universally acknowledged Christian doctrine. Luther's solution: "Such teachers should not be tolerated, but punished as blasphemers... Let [them] go to some place where there are no Christians." Luther was quick to point out, however, that dealing with blasphemers with the power of the state did not compel anyone's individual faith – nor should it. In the fourth scenario, preachers were arguing with one another, not about Scriptural doctrine, but about "ancient custom and man-made law." Luther's solution: "[T]he preachers ought not wrangle about in the presence of the people. Rather they ought to deal always with the Scriptures, for love and peace are far more important than all ceremonies."

<sup>157</sup> *Ibid* 63

Luther's circumstances were quite different from ours.<sup>158</sup> The scenario he envisioned involved conflict in the spiritual realm, not the temporal realm. Nevertheless, this much is clear: "Luther prized peace and unity in the civil realm even at the expense of the free and full proclamation of his own doctrinal position."<sup>159</sup> It is a worthy goal to work for an ordering of society in which people can live at peace with one another.

## THE CONSTRAINTS OF COERCIVE POWER

To do so is not so much a compromise of God's moral law as it is a recognition of the limits of the state's coercive power. The law acts as a curb, restraining the actions of those otherwise bent on evil. The law is most effective as a curb, however, when it is acting on those who see the law as good (even if they desire to break it). When a large enough segment of society is hardened to God's law, the state's coercive power loses its effect. Instead, it produces turmoil and discontent. It stokes even more widespread desire to break it.<sup>160</sup>

This is especially true when it comes to society's deepest problems.

[T]here are no political solutions to the problems most people care about... There are no comprehensive political solutions to the deterioration of "family values," the desire for equity, or the challenge of achieving consensus and solidarity... There are no real political solutions to the absence of decency or the spread of vulgarity. But because the state is a clumsy instrument..., it will always fail to adequately or directly address the human elements of these problems; the elements that make them poignant in the first place. As a rule, when the state does become involved in such matters, its actions can often create more problems through unintended consequences, not fewer.<sup>161</sup>

There are some issues where there is general agreement among Christians that the goalposts have moved, where we no longer expect the coercive power of the state to conform society to God's moral law.<sup>162</sup> There are other issues where there isn't agreement that the goal posts have moved. One issue for which Christians have kept the goal posts in place the longest is abortion. There is good reason for this. As part of our social contract, we give the state a near total monopoly on violence. We need the state to use its coercive power to protect life so that we don't

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<sup>158</sup> So different, in fact, that if neither side were willing to be silent, he proposed that the local temporal rulers would adjudicate the doctrinal matter, a solution we wouldn't dream of pursuing in our day.

<sup>159</sup> Biermann 17

<sup>160</sup> Romans 7:7-10

<sup>161</sup> Hunter 171

<sup>162</sup> Although the case could be made strictly on the basis of the natural knowledge of God, not many Christians are campaigning to ban evolutionary theory public schools nor to criminalize homosexual behavior. Although, evidently at least one pastor still would. After Texas Senator Ted Cruz called a Uganda law that imposed severe penalties for various homosexual behaviors "horrific and wrong," a Baptist pastor from Cape Coral, Florida, criticized him, asking of God's Levitical law deserved the same assessment. Stanton, Andrew. "Ted Cruz Spars With Pastor Over Uganda's Anti-Gay Law," *Newsweek*, 5 Jun. 2023, [www.newsweek.com/ted-cruz-spars-pastor-over-ugandas-anti-gay-law-1804547](http://www.newsweek.com/ted-cruz-spars-pastor-over-ugandas-anti-gay-law-1804547)

have a nation of 300 million vigilantes. Christians rightly keep the protection of life at the top of their list of political priorities.<sup>163</sup>

As a result, Christians ought never hesitate to say that abortion is the moral equivalent of any other form of murder. They can also admit that, given its ability to be carried out in such a discreet way at a time when the life it ends is already fragile, it is a form of murder much more difficult for the clumsy instrument of the state to prevent than most others. They can admit that attempting to do so in totality will likely lead to unintended consequences that will fall most heavily on women.<sup>164</sup> They can admit that attempting to do so in a nation where most citizens think abortion should be legal<sup>165</sup> will come at significant cost to societal peace (even if they remain perfectly happy to pay that cost). If nothing else, Christians will have to come to grips with the fact that the current frontrunner for president in the nation's main pro-life political party called the abortion law passed in the state his nearest competitor governs, a policy that still *permits* abortion for six weeks of pregnancy, "too harsh."<sup>166</sup>

If not even the protection of life is a simple issue in the temporal realm, how much more so issues like marriage, sexuality, and gender identity? While God's moral law – both revealed and natural – is clear, Christians can admit that the state's coercive power has proven itself uniquely ill-equipped at bringing society into alignment with that law. Christians can certainly lament this fact. Even as they do, they can also give thanks when the worthy goal of peace is maintained, especially considering that roughly the same number of people think same-sex marriage should be *legal* today (71%) as thought it should be *illegal* in 1996 (73%).<sup>167</sup>

Deciding if and when the temporal realm's goalposts have moved from the ideal goal of conformity with God's moral law to the still-worthy goal of peace is far more an art than a science.<sup>168</sup> As more hearts become hardened to God's law, Christians continually need to ask: When do we work with our voices and votes for

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<sup>163</sup> "The preservation of wildlife habitats, fair labor laws, just immigration practices, and the curbing of violence and the preservation of life all matter, but they do not matter in the same way or with the same urgency. God's will, made clear in his law and taught in scripture, is unwavering: the protection of human life matters more than securing human comfort..." (Biermann 167).

<sup>164</sup> This is different from the argument Roman Catholic politicians going back to New York Governor Mario Cuomo have used to justify their pro-choice positions. While maintaining that abortion is morally wrong, they argue that they do not have the right to impose their religious beliefs on their fellow citizens, i.e. the government should not interfere with a women's right to make the decision for herself. The government absolutely *should* interfere when its citizens' lives are in danger. The question is to what degree they realistically *can*, especially when the interference is weighed against other unintended consequences.

<sup>165</sup> According to one poll, 51% think it should be illegal under some circumstances and an additional 34% say it should be legal under any circumstances (Saad, Lydia. "Broader Support for Abortion Rights Continues Post-Dobbs," *Gallup*, 14 Jun. 2023, [news.gallup.com/poll/506759/broader-support-abortion-rights-continues-post-dobbs.aspx](https://news.gallup.com/poll/506759/broader-support-abortion-rights-continues-post-dobbs.aspx))

<sup>166</sup> Kinnard, Meg. "DeSantis criticizes Trump for implying Florida abortion ban is 'too harsh,'" *Associated Press*, 17 May 2023, [apnews.com/article/ron-desantis-donald-trump-abortion-florida-d536c67609030a445cab60329b919e75](https://apnews.com/article/ron-desantis-donald-trump-abortion-florida-d536c67609030a445cab60329b919e75)

<sup>167</sup> McCarthy, Justin. "U.S. Same-Sex Marriage Support Holds at 71% High," *Gallup*, 5 Jun. 2023, [news.gallup.com/poll/506636/sex-marriage-support-holds-high.aspx](https://news.gallup.com/poll/506636/sex-marriage-support-holds-high.aspx)

<sup>168</sup> The goals we work for today are not inherently a criticism or betrayal of the goals of Christians who lived half a century ago. It is understandable why Christians would instinctively reach for the levers of power when certain immoral influences seemed like fringe efforts being aggressively imposed on a broad majority. An unmerciful critique of the Christian Right with the advantage of five decades of hindsight isn't entirely fair.

the state to use its coercive power to compel people to follow natural law, and when is the real problem that we need a society in which more people see that law as good? When will the state's sword still cut it, and when is its clumsy instrument woefully inadequate to remove a much deeper societal cancer?

## PEACEFUL SPACE FOR PUBLIC WITNESS

Working for societal peace may in fact serve the interest of God's moral law in a way that surpasses compulsion by the state's sword. For starters, doing so helps foster a social climate in which all ideas – including biblical ones – enjoy free expression.

The long and rich tradition of free speech in our country is not one where Christians ought to be able to freely practice their faith so long as they keep it within the confines of their private lives. Rather, "...religious freedom is also about the right of people to think what they want, say what they think and come together in fellowship without the state looking over their shoulder."<sup>169</sup> While avoiding doing so in a way that seems infantile and self-serving, Christians can be champions of free speech more generally, confident that a wide First Amendment umbrella will have room for them as well. If Christians sense their religious liberty being curtailed, they may choose to speak up, not because they need Caesar's help to carry out Christ's mandate, but because authoritarian levers of power used against Christians can eventually be used against others should those levers change hands.<sup>170</sup>

A Christian should be so disposed that he will suffer every evil and injustice without avenging himself; neither will he seek legal redress in the courts but have utterly no need of temporal authority and law for his own sake. On behalf of others, however, he may and should seek vengeance, justice, protection, and help, and do as much as he can to achieve it.<sup>171</sup>

Christians must also realize the downstream effect of labeling social and political ideologies religions. Once we do, we need to acknowledge that those religions must be confronted with the only instrument at our disposal for doing so: the soul-piercing sword of the Spirit rather than the blunt, clumsy sword of the state. We must also acknowledge that freedom of religion includes religions we don't agree with. Asking members of the LGBTQ community and their supporters to "keep it in the bedroom"<sup>172</sup> is not a far cry from the "freedom *from* religion" crowd

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<sup>169</sup> Bird 109, quoting Hillary Clinton from a speech given as Secretary of State in 2012.

<sup>170</sup> An example of this is seen in discussions about transgender therapy among children. In some states, public school districts are banning teachers and other school employees from informing parents about the behavior of their children and the guidance they are receiving while at school. In other states, puberty blockers and hormone therapy for minors are being banned. In both cases, opponents appeal to parental rights. Whatever coercive power we grant to the state to use on others likely will eventually be used on us, and vice versa.

<sup>171</sup> *Luther's Works vol. 45*, 101. Luther added, "Likewise, the governing authority should, on its own initiative or through the instigation of others, help and protect him too, without any complaint, application, or instigation on his own part. If it fails to do this, he should permit himself to be despoiled and slandered; he should not resist evil, as Christ's words say."

<sup>172</sup> Granted, some of what is done in support of LGBT rights qualifies as lewd behavior all members of a civil society should desire to see stay behind closed doors. The world is not dependent



asking Christians to keep it in their homes and churches. If Christians spend their time speaking up for the rights of others, they may just find that others will take care of the work of protecting the rights of Christians.

Furthermore, our pursuit of the worthy goal of peace gives space for competing moral visions to sort themselves out. Part of God's judgment against evil is to leave it to its own devices. As is the case with wine, the worst judgment against evil is found at the bottom of the bottle. As evil's insatiable thirst is allowed to run its course, it becomes its own worst enemy.<sup>173</sup>

Peace also gives Christians space to vocalize and enact their moral vision in full, public view. This is our best hope for hardened hearts to soften. The values in which good legislation and public policy are rooted cannot themselves be produced or maintained by legislation and policy. Our society needs a way for those values to be on display in the sight of all, absent compulsion. When Christians abandon that work in favor of trying to get their hands on the levers of power, they may be acting in ways that are "counterproductive of the ends to which they aspire."<sup>174</sup>

Working for the worthy goal of peace is what John Inazu calls confident pluralism.

We need a confident pluralism more than ever before. We need a political vision and civic virtues that exhibit "tolerance for dissent, a skepticism of government orthodoxy, and a willingness to endure strange and even offensive ways of life." ...Victory in pluralism is not vanquishing your adversaries, but winning their respect, living in peace with them, and affirming their right to be who they are!<sup>175</sup>

Christians have every reason to be confident about how our moral vision will fare when sorted out amidst others. Peaceful space for public witness lets both good and evil "grow together until the harvest"<sup>176</sup> and allows the difference to become obvious to all.

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on Christians to decry drag queen story hour for children or a topless transgender activist posting live videos from the White House lawn ("Transgender activist no longer welcome at White House after going topless at Biden event," *Associated Press*, 13 Jun 2023, <https://apnews.com/article/biden-transgender-topless-white-house-rose-montoya-811dc7f4473ad6b3dd43dbec7f8b5d37>). However, when it comes to milder displays of support (flags, bumper stickers, etc.) Christians who want to publicly display symbols of their religion might not want to argue against the rights of others to display symbols of theirs.

<sup>173</sup> Habakkuk 2:4–5. In the five "Woes" that follow, the Lord vividly illustrates how Babylon's evil would be its own undoing.

<sup>174</sup> "[I]n the Christian faith, one has the possibility of relatively autonomous institutions and practices that could—both in judgment and affirmation—be a source of ideals and values... But the consequence of the whole-hearted and uncritical embrace of politics by Christians has been, *in effect*, to reduce Christian faith to a political ideology... The political engagement of the various Christian groups is certainly legal, but in ways that are undoubtedly unintended, it has also been counterproductive of the ends to which they aspire" (Hunter 172).

<sup>175</sup> Bird 97 quoting Inazu, *Confident Pluralism*. Inazu describes it this way: "We will continue to struggle with those whose views we regard as irrational, immoral, or even dangerous. We are stuck with the good, the bad, and the ugly of pluralism. Yet confident pluralism remains possible in both law and society... Confident pluralism allows genuine differences to coexist without suppressing or minimizing our firmly held convictions. We can embrace pluralism precisely because we are confident in our own beliefs, and in the groups and institutions that sustain them" (Bird 97).

<sup>176</sup> Matthew 13:24–30

# Our Voice in the Temporal Realm

*In today's intellectual ferment, Christians can speak with clarity and conviction, and there will be people who will listen. The Christian style of thinking, with its tolerance for paradox, with its combination of openness and skepticism, seems especially suited to the intellectual issues of the day.*

– GENE EDWARD VEITH<sup>177</sup>

*Therefore gird up the loins of your mind, be sober.*

– 1 PETER 1:13

Some may doubt whether working for peaceful space for public witness is realistic anymore. Already back in 2015, during the proceedings leading up to the Supreme Court's *Obergefell v. Hodges* decision, Justice Samuel Alito asked Solicitor General Donald Verilli if religious schools could lose their tax-exempt status if they opposed same-sex marriage. Verilli acknowledged, "[I]t's certainly going to be an issue. I don't deny that."<sup>178</sup> Following a May 2023 article alleging discrimination in Wisconsin private schools receiving school choice dollars,<sup>179</sup> it may have felt as though the walls of peaceful space were closing in. So long as any peaceful space remains, however, we can be optimistic about what it will reveal.

Sometimes ten days of space is all that's needed. That's what Daniel asked for on behalf of himself and his three friends: a ten-day test during which they would not be compelled to defile themselves with Babylon's diet. At the end of those ten days, "they looked healthier and better nourished than any of the young men who ate the royal food."<sup>180</sup> Those ten days bought them three years in the king's leadership training program. At the end of those three years, the king "found them ten times better than all the magicians and enchanters in his whole kingdom."<sup>181</sup> This was much more than a reflection of the unique gifts of these four young men.

There was a reason Daniel and his fellow-Hebrews were ten times better in their

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<sup>177</sup> Veith 145-146

<sup>178</sup> Farris, Michael. "Flashback: Christian schools will have no choice about gay marriage," *USA Today*, 10 May 2015, [www.usatoday.com/story/opinion/2015/05/10/same-sex-marriage-christian-college-column/26883351/](http://www.usatoday.com/story/opinion/2015/05/10/same-sex-marriage-christian-college-column/26883351/)

<sup>179</sup> Petrovic, Phoebe. "False choice: Wisconsin taxpayers support schools that can discriminate," *Wisconsin Watch*, 5 May 2023, [www.wisconsinwatch.org/2023/05/wisconsin-voucher-schools-discrimination-lgbtq-disabilities/](http://www.wisconsinwatch.org/2023/05/wisconsin-voucher-schools-discrimination-lgbtq-disabilities/)

<sup>180</sup> Daniel 1:15

<sup>181</sup> Daniel 1:20

studies than the magicians and the enchanters. It is the same reason today's Christians can outdo their nonbelieving friends... The worldview of the magicians and the enchanters got in the way of their finding truth.<sup>182</sup>

No matter how much peaceful space we have and for how long, Christians can gird up the loins of their minds and step into that space confident of how they will fare.

## THE SOPHISTICATION OF SLOWNESS

In fact, Christians have the upper hand from the outset. As people who take seriously the fallenness of mankind, we can be slow to affirm any idea as entirely good. Even if everything it says is true, no human idea can say everything true there is to say. On the other hand, as people who take seriously the natural knowledge of God (not to mention the civilization-wide influence of Christianity<sup>183</sup>), we can be slow to condemn any idea as entirely bad.<sup>184</sup>

This allows Christians to find so-called "Egyptian gold" almost everywhere.<sup>185</sup> Not only can we stand in line with the children of Israel walking out of Egypt with precious metals in hand,<sup>186</sup> we can remember that any gold we plunder from secular thought was likely smelted from biblical ore in the first place. Ideas secular thinkers put their fingers on were likely "waiting patiently for us in the Bible all along," even if "we had no eyes to see."<sup>187</sup> When some shimmer of secular thought catches our eye, we can welcome the one wearing it to the party, even if we must simultaneously admit we stepped outside for a bit.

This gives Christian thinkers an upper hand in two ways. First, Christians can engage with opposing views in a way that is charitable. Rather than "ventriloquizing"<sup>188</sup> others, Christians can explain an idea "in language that those who most love it would be happy to own."<sup>189</sup> Christians can acknowledge an idea's appeal – what makes it sparkle for the one around whose neck it hangs. Second, Christians can be

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<sup>182</sup> Veith 123

<sup>183</sup> "Even our culture's antipathy to Christianity is so thoroughly...well, Christian... We live at a peculiar moment in history when our culture's assumptions and values retain a deeply Christian imprint but when the teachings of the Bible are largely unknown, misunderstood, or condemned. This makes for a strange and at times amusing situation in which society increasingly sets itself against Christianity but does so by using distinctively Christian arguments and assumptions" (Watkin 15).

<sup>184</sup> "[A] Christian approach to social critique is a particularly open and sophisticated form of cultural engagement: for the Christian nothing in culture is utterly evil, and nothing is exhaustively good" (Watkin 169 quoting Timothy Keller).

<sup>185</sup> For example, see Watkin 253; Brad East *Once More, Church and Culture*. Watkin also warns, "Christian social and cultural theory must cultivate a deep and sympathetic but also a sharp and clear-minded engagement with the cultures in which it takes root. It must make every use it can of Egyptian gold, but always be on its guard, remembering that this same gold was melted down into the idolatrous golden calf" (605)

<sup>186</sup> Exodus 12:35–36

<sup>187</sup> Watkin 309. This realization allows for much more than a willingness to give each idea some begrudging nod. It allows for a humble curiosity in which one can say: "This fascinates me because there is something in this that my theology has known about for thousands of years" (Paustian 176, crediting Gene Edward Veith).

<sup>188</sup> Watkin defines the term this way: "We find what we were looking for, and we go away satisfied but none the wiser and without having encountered anything but our ideas reflected back at us" (507).

<sup>189</sup> Watkin calls this the "acid test" of a hermeneutic of charity (507).

quick to admit the incompleteness or incorrectness of their own thought and speech. As Daniel demonstrated in exile<sup>190</sup> and Peter instructed his exiled readers, judgment begins with the household of God.<sup>191</sup> As a result of this sophistication of slowness, Christians are capable of persuading and learning in a way that is unavailable to those who frame every idea in Manichean terms and for whom every argument carries the weight of their entire worldview.

## THE PERPENDICULAR PLANKS OF PARADOX

This same sophistication of slowness allows Christians to contribute to the conversation uniquely. When two ideas are presented side by side, one option would be to assess them on the basis of an “either-or” choice. Through the tools of logical reasoning, evidence-based research, and the scientific method, each idea is analyzed with an assumed objectivity. This approach forms a closed circle in which every idea either fits as true or doesn’t fit as false.

Another approach assesses ideas on the basis of a “none of and all of the above” approach. All truth is alleged to be subjective and every viewpoint biased. No idea can be deemed true and no idea false. This approach forms an open, amorphous cloud in which all ideas and no ideas find a true fit.

Rather than the modernist’s “either-or” approach or the postmodernist’s “none of and all of the above” approach, Christianity offers a “yes, but...” approach.<sup>192</sup> If every idea is like a plank of wood lying on the ground – likely articulating something true but likely not articulating everything true – what’s needed is another plank, perpendicular to the first and forming with it a single, paradoxical thought.

An open, amorphous cloud has no shape. A closed circle has a fixed shape that may stretch slightly but is undone by any truth that exists outside its bounds. The perpendicular planks of the Christian faith form an altogether different shape:

The cross, though it has at its heart a collision and a contradiction, can extend its four arms forever without altering its shape. Because it has a paradox in its centre it can grow without changing... The cross opens its arms to the four winds.<sup>193</sup>

This uniquely Christian approach has been referred to as *subversive fulfillment*.<sup>194</sup> It enables social critique that is “not nihilistic but creative and constructive.”<sup>195</sup> Given the choice between two opposing ideas, it “settles for neither and presents us with something richer than both.”<sup>196</sup> A single plank, whether its

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<sup>190</sup> Daniel 9:4-19

<sup>191</sup> 1 Peter 4:17

<sup>192</sup> See Veith 137ff. Veith quotes G.K. Chesterton to make the important point that this approach is different from compromise: “[T]he church not only kept seemingly inconsistent things side by side, but, what was more, allowed them to break out in a sort of artistic violence... It has kept them side by side like two strong colours, red and white... It has always had a healthy hatred of pink. It hates that combination of two colours which is the feeble expedient of the philosophers. It hates that evolution of black into white which is tantamount to a dirty gray... It is not a mixture like russet or purple; it is rather like a shot silk, for a shot silk is always at right angles, and is in the pattern of a cross” (140).

<sup>193</sup> Veith 147, quoting G.K. Chesterton

<sup>194</sup> It seems the term originated with Daniel Strange in *Plugged In: Connecting Your Faith With What You Watch, Read, and Play*.

<sup>195</sup> Hunter 235

<sup>196</sup> Watkin 15

grain runs modern or postmodern, can only “lead to intellectual and educational dead ends. A biblical worldview, on the other hand, ...is open to truth of all kinds... and offers a way of giving that truth purpose, value, context, and coherence.”<sup>197</sup>

## IN PRACTICE

A skeptic might respond that there are surely some ideas in the world that are unequivocally contrary to the Christian faith – caves from which no Egyptian gold can be mined, planks so thoroughly rotted they ought only be burned. An evaluation of some of today’s most discussed ideas will hopefully demonstrate the uniqueness and possibility of Christian social critique.

## CRITICAL THEORY

In the months following Glenn Youngkin’s surprising victory in the November 2021 Virginia gubernatorial race, three suddenly ubiquitous letters animated conversations in school board meetings across the country: CRT. Critical Race Theory is one of a family of distinct-but-related manifestations of critical theory.<sup>198</sup> One of critical theory’s core components is a radical skepticism<sup>199</sup> or hermeneutics of suspicion.<sup>200</sup> What Freud called “repression” and Marx called “false consciousness” Nietzsche sought to unmask when he said Christian morals were really a masquerade for resentment and jealousy. The hermeneutics of suspicion assume something is always hiding beneath the surface. They are built on the belief that humans are masters of truth suppression.

So what should Christians make of this impulse toward skepticism and suspicion? For starters, they can affirm it as entirely biblical. Long before Freud, Marx, and Nietzsche, Paul articulated the same human propensity to suppress truth in service to self-made idols.<sup>201</sup> Though modern critical theory often stands in opposition to Christianity, it does so using an impulse that is “legitimate to call distinctively biblical.”<sup>202</sup> One Christian philosopher dubbed Marx, Freud, and Nietzsche “the great modern theologians of original sin.”<sup>203</sup>

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<sup>197</sup> Veith 123

<sup>198</sup> The list includes Critical Race Theory (CRT), gender theory, queer theory, crip (crippled) theory, fat theory, etc. For an overview and analysis, see Pluckrose and Lindsay.

<sup>199</sup> “[Radical skepticism] says, ‘All knowledge is constructed: what is interesting is theorizing about why knowledge got constructed this way.’ Thus, radical skepticism is markedly different from the scientific skepticism that characterized the Enlightenment” (Pluckrose and Lindsay 34).

<sup>200</sup> “The hermeneutics of suspicion is an approach that ‘is not an explication of the object,’ whether that object is a cultural practice, artifact, or person ‘but a tearing off of masks, an interpretation that reduces disguises.’ When faced with a cultural phenomenon, argument, or movement, the hermeneutics of suspicion first asks not ‘what does it mean?’ but ‘what is it hiding?’” (Watkin 122 quoting Paul Ricoeur).

<sup>201</sup> Romans 1:18ff

<sup>202</sup> “This impulse, which is legitimate to call distinctively biblical, is the animating impulse behind the waves of modern critical theory that have, not without some irony, set themselves implacably against Christianity. In so doing they are of course seeking to expose inconsistencies and contradictions in Christianity, but this is itself an extension of the self-critique that the Bible already performs on religion through its relentless undermining of idolatry” (Watkin 122–123).

<sup>203</sup> Watkin 120, quoting Merold Westphal

Christians can also thank critical theory for helping dismantle the Enlightenment fallacy that human beings can pursue truth in objective, unbiased ways. It helps expose the illusion that the relationship between human beings and truth is akin to the relationship between an icon on a computer screen and the folder it represents: a quick double click from reason and science gives us full access to its contents.<sup>204</sup>

On the other hand, Christians can also point out how quickly critical theory goes awry. To begin with, the same truth suppression alleged by critical theory can easily be alleged of it.<sup>205</sup> In fact, the motive most alleged is the one by which human beings are most driven: our need for moral justification. Those who belong to historically oppressed groups aim critical theory at others, in effect becoming like the Sunday School teacher who concludes the lesson on Jesus' parable of the pharisee and the tax collector by saying, "Now children, let us fold our hands, close our eyes, bow our heads, and thank God that we are not like that Pharisee."<sup>206</sup> Those who belong to historically oppressing groups aim critical theory at themselves, resulting in endless self-loathing, a "bourgeois horror of the bourgeois."<sup>207</sup> Christians can stand in line with critics of critical theory (assuming we understand we are using critical theory to critique critical theory) who say, "In no serious discipline do we so plainly see a drive to be morally right (or righteous) instead of factually and theoretically correct."<sup>208</sup>

Secondly, critical theory offers no solution to the problem it aims to unmask. It is good to be suspicious of hidden motives, but only for the purpose of seeing a deeper reality. Endless suspicion can only lead to suspicion of suspicion itself. "You cannot go on 'seeing through' things for ever. The whole point of seeing through something is to see something through it."<sup>209</sup>

In the end, Christianity uniquely provides the perpendicular plank that critical theory lacks. Critical theory offers a "view from everywhere." It rejects all metanarratives (thus making itself into one) and insists all knowledge is culturally constructed. Its counterpart is a "view from nowhere," the equal and opposite metanarrative that insists reason and science are objective. The subversive fulfillment, the "yes, but..." to both is a "view from somewhere"—from first-century Palestine—that...opens its arms to embrace all people...<sup>210</sup> Christianity rejects both metanarratives in favor of a *mesonarrative*: "Ultimate reality is manifest in the grubbiness of the everyday, in Christ's sinewy flesh, at a particular moment in history rather than on a 'meta' level of abstract explanation."<sup>211</sup>

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<sup>204</sup> Watkin 239-240. The phrase "double click knowledge" comes from Bruno Latour. If it sounds like an overstatement of modernism's view of the relationship between human beings and truth, Pluckrose and Lindsay's faith in reason and science is nearly as strong: "...objective truth [is] something that exists and...can be provisionally known (or approximated) through processes such as experimentation, falsification, and defeasibility—as Enlightenment, modernist, and scientific thought would have it" (32).

<sup>205</sup> See Owen for a case that "Critical theory as a style appears to be setting the terms of our politics" on all sides and from all sources.

<sup>206</sup> Ibid 123, quoting Merold Westphal

<sup>207</sup> Ibid 123, quoting Oliver O'Donovan

<sup>208</sup> Pluckrose and Lindsay 218

<sup>209</sup> Watkin 124-125, quoting C. S. Lewis

<sup>210</sup> Ibid 365

<sup>211</sup> Ibid 369

## SYSTEMIC OPPRESSION

A post on social media alleged injustice at the hands of “the system.” It led its readers to believe that dark, pervasive forces were working against them, putting immense wealth and power in the hands of few at the expense of many. Its author promised liberation. Only he could lead the way. No doubt he was some sort of progressive, neo-Marxist, America-hating socialist. His name: Dave Ramsey.<sup>212</sup>

Few entities receive as much scorn in our world as “the system.” Racism, sexism, and injustice are not just problems. They are *systemic* problems.<sup>213</sup> Certain groups within society have privilege while others are oppressed. Some face oppression on multiple fronts and suffer cumulative harm greater than the sum of its parts (i.e. intersectionality). Each person’s unique combination of grievances earns them a spot within a hierarchy of oppressed groups, a competition some have dubbed the “Oppression Olympics.”<sup>214</sup>

So what should Christians make of the accusations of the serially aggrieved? For one, Christians can recognize that this phenomenon is employed by each side of our cultural divisions. For every aspersion cast on the patriarchy, heteronormativity, cisnormativity, Big Ag, and whiteness, a grievance is filed due to the crisis of masculinity, the gynocracy, Big Tech,<sup>215</sup> and wokeism.

Christians can also recognize that the impulse to identify with the aggrieved is a biblical one.<sup>216</sup> Oppression and liberation are major themes of the biblical narrative, most notably in the account of the Exodus. Cries for liberation from each side draw from “the same exodic well.”<sup>217</sup> American Christians can acknowledge that their instinct to reject the possibility of systemic problems and the potential of systemic solutions in favor of individual responsibility and personal choice is likely due to the degree we are influenced by Arminianism.<sup>218</sup> We can admit that inter-

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<sup>212</sup> Facebook post from the page “Dave Ramsey,” dated March 7, 2023

<sup>213</sup> “Systemic racism” was one of the Oxford English Dictionary’s defining terms of 2020 ([www.npr.org/2020/11/23/938187229/oxfords-defining-words-of-2020-blursday-systemic-racism-and-yes-pandemic](http://www.npr.org/2020/11/23/938187229/oxfords-defining-words-of-2020-blursday-systemic-racism-and-yes-pandemic))

<sup>214</sup> It seems the term was first coined by author Elizabeth Martínez in a conversation on May 12, 1993 ([culturalstudies.ucsc.edu/inscriptions/volume-7/angela-y-davis-elizabeth-martinez/](http://culturalstudies.ucsc.edu/inscriptions/volume-7/angela-y-davis-elizabeth-martinez/)).

<sup>215</sup> Journalist Michael Shellenberger coined the term “Censorship Industrial Complex” in his testimony before the House Select Committee on the Weaponization of the Federal Government on March 9, 2023 ([judiciary.house.gov/sites/evo-subsites/republicans-judiciary.house.gov/files/evo-media-document/shellenberger-testimony.pdf](http://judiciary.house.gov/sites/evo-subsites/republicans-judiciary.house.gov/files/evo-media-document/shellenberger-testimony.pdf)).

<sup>216</sup> A phenomenon in historiography that is usually associated with the class-consciousness of Marxism is known as “history from below,” history written “not just about ordinary working people, but from their perspective” (Watkin 275). This is exactly the biblical perspective we find both in the gospels and in the exodus narrative. “The exodus narrative is a discourse from the margins of ancient empires; it does not emanate from the grand courts of power and centers of Egypt, Assyria, or Babylon, but from a slave nation led by a former shepherd with no royal blood” (Watkin 276).

<sup>217</sup> Watkin 272

<sup>218</sup> Putnam and Campbell suggest that American Christians’ “deeply held individualistic belief system” makes them less likely to consider systemic explanations and remedies for problems like poverty (256-257) and racism (315). Watkin illustrates the ways the conservative right and the progressive left tend to approach issues of oppression and liberation using the account of the fall into sin: “Broadly speaking, the right would respond to the fall narrative with a shrug of the shoulders: Adam and Eve have made their choice, and they must live with it. It was their sin and nobody else’s. Tough love is needed to make them wake up to what they have done and make better choices next time. The left, by contrast, would rail at the injustice of God’s judgment: poor Eve was a victim manipulated by the cunning serpent, the problem is with the structure of the garden (why is that tree

sectionality is a “relatively uncontroversial idea”<sup>219</sup> and that Jesus’ own ministry was “‘intersectional’ before its time, acknowledging and engaging with multiple intersecting oppressions.”<sup>220</sup>

Christians can also use this impulse to their advantage. Following the Supreme Court’s decision to overturn *Roe v. Wade*, large corporations like Amazon, Microsoft, Starbucks, and Tesla assured their female employees that they would pay for expenses needed to travel across state lines in order to have an abortion.<sup>221</sup> This gave Christians the opportunity to use the oppression-liberation narrative to expose the bankruptcy of abortion ideology: Women’s “growing emancipation from their biology” only frees them “to serve a different, disembodied body — ‘corporate’ America.”<sup>222</sup>

On the other hand, Christians can also point out that the oppression-liberation narrative, true so far as it goes, is incomplete. It is a major biblical theme, but not its only theme. It can easily become the hammer for which everything is a nail. Christians can point out that people need both halves of Moses’ exodic imperative, that any “Let my people go” (freedom *from*) without “so that they may worship me (freedom *for*)”<sup>223</sup> will only result in liberated people longing for slavery again.<sup>224</sup>

Christians can point out that the oppression-liberation narrative cannot solve the problem it identifies and often creates new forms of the disease it wishes to cure.

The right fails to acknowledge that when freed from regulation and government, individuals and institutions become prey to the harsh, brutal lordship of the market. As for the left, it fails to see that liberation from historical oppressions comes with the implementation of a new suite of social and discursive dogmas and orthodoxies often enforced with the religious fervor of an inquisition, and with just as brutal exclusions and excommunications as the old structures it wishes to tear down.<sup>225</sup>

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there?) and not with Eve, and God’s judgment heaps oppression upon deception and systematic injustice” (130).

<sup>219</sup> Pluckrose and Lindsay acknowledge that Kimberlé Crenshaw, with whom the concept originated, “accurately recognizes that it is possible to uniquely discriminate against someone who falls within an ‘intersection’ of oppressed identities” (56-57) and that she “makes some important points” (123).

<sup>220</sup> Watkin 380. He references the Canaanite woman as an example (Matthew 15:21–28). Another would be the Samaritan woman at the well. Though John’s parenthetical remark at the end of 4:9 points us in one direction, one could otherwise argue over which word deserves emphasis when the woman expresses her surprise that Jesus is talking to her: Samaritan or woman (especially considering Jesus knew full well that she was the kind of woman that normally caused religious leaders to keep their distance, Luke 7:39).

<sup>221</sup> Goldberg, Emma. “These Companies Will Cover Travel Expenses for Employee Abortions: Dozens of companies have committed to helping their employees get access to reproductive care,” *New York Times*, 19 Aug. 2022, [www.nytimes.com/article/abortion-companies-travel-expenses.html](http://www.nytimes.com/article/abortion-companies-travel-expenses.html)

<sup>222</sup> Deneen 187

<sup>223</sup> Exodus 7:16

<sup>224</sup> Exodus 16:3

<sup>225</sup> Watkin 273



One tool of oppression each side employs is the Noble Lie.<sup>226</sup> Those who argue most strenuously for the liberation of the market benefit from that liberation most. Meanwhile the masses are consoled by the annual new iPhone release and the illusion that they have just as much access to opportunity as the aristocratic class.<sup>227</sup> On the flipside, those who argue most strenuously for liberation from the shackles of traditional family values continue to practice those values, thus guaranteeing their continued success over those they persuade not to.<sup>228</sup> It turns out that the gold medal for winning the Oppression Olympics is more oppression.

In the end, Christianity uniquely provides the perpendicular plank that the oppression-liberation narrative lacks. Its subversive fulfillment, its “yes, but...” both disrupts “the smug illusions of the privileged” and provides a better alternative for the oppressed than “seeking to overthrow them by imitating them.”<sup>229</sup> It rejects the Noble Lie, speaking truth to power and to the powerless.<sup>230</sup> It couples radical kindness for the more “fashionable” victims of intersectional oppression with an equally radical kindness even when it harms our social credit score.<sup>231</sup> It proclaims freedom for the oppressed and forgiveness for their oppressors. It completes our freedom *from* slavery to an alliance of cruel masters with freedom *for* slavery to a single, compassionate one.

#### EXPRESSIVE INDIVIDUALISM

“I’m special. Look at me.” This is the sentiment author Douglas Murray likes to say is really behind someone’s announcement that they are gender non-binary. Even if he’s right, the same assessment can just as easily be applied to a phenomenon far broader. It’s most often referred to as expressive individualism. It goes by less

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<sup>226</sup> “Then if any one at all is to have the privilege of lying, the rulers of the State should be the persons; and they, in their dealings either with enemies or with their own citizens, may be allowed to lie for the public good. But nobody else should meddle with anything of the kind; and although the rulers have this privilege, for a private man to lie to them in return is to be deemed a more heinous fault than for the patient or the pupil of a gymnasium not to speak the truth about his own bodily illnesses to the physician or to the trainer, or for a sailor not to tell the captain what is happening about the ship and the rest of the crew, and how things are going with himself or his fellow sailors” (*Plato’s Republic*, Book 3).

<sup>227</sup> “There has always been, and probably always will be, economic inequality, but few civilizations appear to have so extensively perfected the separation of winners from losers or created such a massive apparatus to winnow those who will succeed from those who will fail... The losers, meanwhile, are consoled with the reminder that they are wealthy beyond compare to even the wealthiest aristocrats of an earlier age. Material comforts are a ready salve for the discontents of the soul” (Deneen 9–10).

<sup>228</sup> “Elites are studiously silent about the familial basis of their relative success. Marital stability is now a form of competitive advantage for the upper tier, an advantage amplified by the insistence that family formation is a matter of individual choice and even an obstacle to autonomy. Having shaped the family in the image of the Hobbesian state of nature, its adoption by the strong is now one more tool over the weak” (Deneen 134).

<sup>229</sup> Watkin 276

<sup>230</sup> “God cares about the thoughts and opinions of the firewood gatherers and the water carriers just as he cares about the thoughts of the king... God...has the same message for Israel’s kings as for Israel’s kids” (Watkin 300).

<sup>231</sup> “Jesus’s sympathy for rich tax collectors was nothing short of reputationally suicidal” (Watkin 381). He posits today’s elderly and pimps as modern equivalents.

formal names like the religion of “The God Within.”<sup>232</sup> It is the subject of complex analysis while also taking forms as simple “Be yourself” and “Follow your heart.” Its modern manifestations range from the Personality Type Industrial Complex<sup>233</sup> to the stating and requesting of pronouns during formal introductions. In our day, expressive individualism has become virtually indistinguishable from sexual orientation and gender identity<sup>234</sup> with the result that the biblical concept of the soul has all but been replaced by the modern concept of “sexuality.”<sup>235</sup> Wherever it reigns supreme, the “sempiternal orgiast” is society’s great hero,<sup>236</sup> and the purpose of religion and therapy are one and the same.<sup>237</sup> No matter what it’s called or how it’s defined, it is pervasive. “[W]e are all expressive individuals now.”<sup>238</sup>

It may be difficult to see how a Christian critique of expressive individualism can include any affirmation. It is worth noting, however, that the *deification* of our inner selves couldn’t happen if not for the Bible’s *imago dei*. There would be no evolution from soul to sexuality without a notion of the soul in the first place. We can also be grateful for concepts like individual rights and universal human dignity, both of which are rooted in the same *imago dei*, at a time when tribal, nationalistic, and ethnocentric furor seem to be fomenting.<sup>239</sup> It should also be noted that plenty of historians trace the origins of expressive individualism to the Lutheran Reformation. The Reformation’s emphasis on the freedom of the individual conscience against the tyranny of church and state finds resonance with modern notions of the self.

With those affirmations in place, critique can begin. Perhaps this is the topic where critique most needs to begin close to home (and stay there a good long while). Assumptions of expressive individualism manifest themselves in far more ways than same-sex marriage and sex reassignment surgery. They’re just as present in modern concepts of romance that make emotion the driving force behind the decision to marry and portray the romantic quest as a search for one’s soulmate, a fairytale many Christians have bought into.<sup>240</sup> Christians can easily join the world

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<sup>232</sup> Douthat 210ff

<sup>233</sup> Personality tests are estimated to be a \$2 billion industry. “Their appeal is both magnetic and obvious: ego.” Goldberg, Emma. “The \$2 Billion Question of Who You Are at Work,” *New York Times*, 5 Mar. 2023, [www.nytimes.com/2023/03/05/business/remote-work-personality-tests.html](http://www.nytimes.com/2023/03/05/business/remote-work-personality-tests.html)

<sup>234</sup> “Thinking of human beings as fundamentally defined by their sexual desire is now virtually intuitive for us all. We are categorized as straight, gay, bi, queer, and so on” (Trueman *The Rise and Triumph of the Modern Self* 204).

<sup>235</sup> “Hence the importance we ascribe to it, the reverential fear with which we surround it, the care we take to know it” (Watkin 515 quoting Michel Foucault).

<sup>236</sup> Trueman *Sex Trumps History*. Even Freud was surprised by the extent one of his disciples, Austrian psychoanalyst Wilhelm Reich, was willing to push Freud’s theories. In 1928, Freud wrote about Reich, “We have here a Dr. Reich, a worthy but impetuous young man, passionately devoted to his hobby-horse who now salutes in the genital orgasm the antidote to every neurosis” (Trueman *The Rise and Triumph of the Modern Self* 243).

<sup>237</sup> The religion of the God Within offers “a kind of spiritual comfort food rather than a spur to moral transformation—there when you need it, and not a bother when you don’t. It’s the church of the Oprah Winfrey Network, you might say: religion as a path to constant self-affirmation, heresy as self-help, the quest for God as the ultimate form of therapy” (Douthat 230).

<sup>238</sup> Trueman *The Rise and Triumph of the Modern Self* 25

<sup>239</sup> See Rose, *A World after Liberalism*. See also James Lindsay’s recent episode of his *New Discourses* podcast entitled “WTF Is Christian Nationalism?” (<https://newdiscourses.com/2023/08/wtf-is-christian-nationalism/>)

<sup>240</sup> “We’ve collectively been sold a fairy tale of finding that one person with whom you’ll live happily ever after... Your one-and-only is your soul mate, the person with whom you are 100 percent

in divinizing consent<sup>241</sup> by making decisions about marriage and procreation (whether we get married, when we get married, to whom we get married, whether we have kids, when we have kids, and how many kids we have) entirely on the basis of personal, autonomous choice with little consideration for wider obligations. Christians can recognize that the picture of a single-family suburban home where a mom and dad have enough square footage for their 2.3 children and a spacious yard for the family dog is nearly as modern<sup>242</sup> as ABC's *Modern Family* and can be just as much a manifestation of expressive individualism. Christians can admit that we have too often given a free pass to expressive individualism so long as it is of a heterosexual and cisgender variety. We can admit that, while the world has surely heard our more generic "male and female he created them" and "marriage is between one man, one woman,"<sup>243</sup> perhaps it has not so clearly witnessed our trademarked, "Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me."<sup>244</sup>

Christians may feel justified in criticizing Black Lives Matter for its self-professed desire to dismantle the nuclear family,<sup>245</sup> while ignoring the fact that Jesus essentially asks the same thing of his followers.<sup>246</sup> We can admit that an unhealthy fetishization of said nuclear family may be the reason American churches seem to have very little to offer those whose desires make it difficult for them to fit its uniform mold.<sup>247</sup> Provocative as it may sound, an honest Christian critique might

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sexually and emotionally compatible. He or she will fulfill all your needs" (Burton 158). She's citing Tristan Taormino, who is making an argument for polyamory. Though we'd offer a different solution, she correctly identifies the problem. Branson Parler makes the case that many Christians have bought into the myth of romance ("You complete me") and the myth of the sexual prosperity gospel ("Your best sex life now") in *Every Body's Story: 6 Myths about Sex and the Gospel Truth about Marriage and Singleness*.

<sup>241</sup> "As one longtime submissive involved in a 24-7 master-slave relationship told me, 'If we had a god, that god would be consent.' That divination of consent is twofold, and telling. On the one hand, it rightly prioritizes the importance of explicit sexual consent—that all practices, however risky or outré, be enthusiastically agreed to by all parties. But that valorization of consent as the foundational basis for human action among the sexual utopians says something much bigger... Our purpose, at a very real and deep level, is to express our authentic selves, and to pursue that self through freedom. We are totally free beings, beholden to nobody but ourselves. Exerting that freedom, furthermore, is at the core of what it means to pursue the good. Our choices, in this model, both define and liberate us" (Burton 159).

<sup>242</sup> "The nuclear family structured around a male breadwinner was in fact a recent invention, arising in the 1920s and peaking in the 1950s and 1960s; before then, multigenerational families relying on multiple contributors to the family economy had been the norm." (du Mez 36).

<sup>243</sup> Genesis 1:26 and 2:24. "Generic" simply suggests that both truths are part of natural law and have been recognized globally throughout human history.

<sup>244</sup> Matthew 16:24. Just as we are all expressive individuals now, we are also all users of the singular *they*, whether we like it or not. Nevertheless, it is worth noting that every pronoun and the subject of every verb in this verse is singular. No one is exempt from Jesus' call to renounce expressive individualism.

<sup>245</sup> "We disrupt the Western-prescribed nuclear family structure requirement by supporting each other as extended families and 'villages' that collectively care for one another, especially our children, to the degree that mothers, parents, and children are comfortable" ([www.politifact.com/article/2020/aug/28/ask-politifact-does-black-lives-matter-aim-destroy/](http://www.politifact.com/article/2020/aug/28/ask-politifact-does-black-lives-matter-aim-destroy/)).

<sup>246</sup> Matthew 10:35–39, Matthew 10:46–50, Matthew 19:28–30, Luke 14:25–27

<sup>247</sup> "Too often contemporary Christian treatments of sexuality make the idea of chastity seem like a kind of divine punishment, whether for a failed marriage or an unchosen sexual orientation. This concept would have been entirely foreign to earlier eras of Christian history, which valorized celibacy as the highest and holiest of callings and elevated various forms of committed friendship and nonfamilial community as viable alternatives to Christian marriage—equal in dignity and perhaps

conclude that members of the LGBTQ community have put into practice Jesus' words about renouncing earthly familial ties and finding alternative forms of community better than American Christians have.<sup>248</sup>

After taking a much-needed dose of its own medicine, Christian critique can proceed to expose the empty promises of expressive individualism in all its forms. To begin with, expressive individualism is an illusion. Even what we consider our deepest and truest desires are shaped by countless imperceptible, external forces. Our sense of self is constantly manipulated and commodified with surgical precision by a sophisticated market.<sup>249</sup> Expressive individualism is also an impossibility. It cannot be practiced by everyone equally. It demands a recognition that will inevitably infringe on the expressive individualism of someone else. It results in a society full of "terrorists of identity,"<sup>250</sup> where ever-escalating means are used to extract recognition from those who may be reluctant to give it. Finally, expressive individualism ends up delivering the opposite of what it promises. Although 80% of today's teenagers agree with the statement "I am an important person" (up from 12% in 1950), the same segment of the population is suffering from loneliness and anxiety at historic levels.<sup>251</sup> Because the burden of self-definition is too great for anyone to bear, the quest for it ends up being quixotic, just as Jesus warned.<sup>252</sup>

In the end, Christianity uniquely provides the perpendicular plank to an identity that that is either expanded through autonomous expression or diminished through external repression. Presented with the options that someone must be accepted or rejected *as they are*,<sup>253</sup> Christianity offers people a truer and better self *in Christ* and the community of individuals that together form his body. It offers relief from the crushing "obligation of having to fully express, or even fully understand myself here and now" and points people to the day when "the carnivorous lion...will lie down with the lamb and yet be more lion than ever."<sup>254</sup> Its subversive

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superior in holiness. From the early Church to the Victorian era, rituals and gestures grew up to exalt and commemorate chaste same-sex affection, and forms of communal life were made available to unmarried Christians who didn't feel called to take monastic vows" (Douthat 289–290).

<sup>248</sup> Rosario Butterfield is a former lesbian and gay rights activist. She is now married to a Christian pastor and has written extensively about providing alternative forms of community as a way of evangelizing. Her own conversion to Christianity came after years of being invited to regular meals at the home of a Christian pastor and his wife. She has said that everything she knows about community and movement building she learned gay rights activist (podcast.choosetruthovertribe.com/episodes/rosaria-butterfield-christian-lesbian).

<sup>249</sup> "The corporate sector, for its part, seeks to grow its profits through market segmentation, creating ever more identities that it can sell to. The irony at the hard of this commodification of identity can be seen nowhere more clearly than in the mass production and consumption of individuality itself... The advertising message is incessant, 'Buy thyself!'" (Watkin 570).

<sup>250</sup> The term comes from Albert Camus' *The Just Assassins*.

<sup>251</sup> Douthat 234-235 citing research from Jean Twenge, *iGen*.

<sup>252</sup> Matthew 16:25

<sup>253</sup> Messages from churches that assure people that they are welcome "as you are" are no doubt well intentioned. They can easily be a reflection the assumptions of expressive individualism, however, not to mention be a little disingenuous in a world where most people will equate that language with unconditional affirmation of every lifestyle and behavior. If nothing else, it sounds a different tone from Dietrich Bonhoeffer's comment in *The Cost of Discipleship*: "When Christ calls a man, he bids him come and die."

<sup>254</sup> Watkin 578. Specifically in a world where expressive individualism is highly sexualized, one that "often uses sex as a means of momentarily anesthetizing or distracting people from the basic vacuity of their lives," and where, "the only form of "self-transcendence is orgasm" (Hauerwas 64), Christians can valorize the "more heroic chastity" (Douthat 136) of the involuntarily celibate and

fulfillment, its “yes, but...” assures today’s expressive individuals that the self-denial they fear will cause them to lose their identity will instead be the surest way for them to find it.<sup>255</sup>

Finding our voice in the temporal realm is rarely a quick or easy process. It’s unlikely to happen in those social spaces that make raising our voices quick and easy. Nevertheless, the temporal realm needs the voice that only Christians can bring to the conversation. “Good philosophy must exist, if for no other reason, because bad philosophy needs to be answered.”<sup>256</sup>

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those who experience same-sex attraction. Rather than choosing between “either the complete abandonment of the Christian view of marriage or the blinkered quest for psychiatric ‘cures’ (itself a Christian surrender to the cult of therapy)” (Douthat 291), Christians can offer even stronger forms of community than those which one might have to give up for the sake of Christ.

<sup>255</sup> Matthew 16:25

<sup>256</sup> Veith 153 quoting C. S. Lewis

## Our Way in the Temporal Realm

*I have written much...about churches, and monasteries, and universities; but these were never where the mass of the Christian people were most influentially shaped. It was always in the home that children were likeliest to absorb the revolutionary teachings that, over the course of two thousand years, have come to be so taken for granted as almost to seem human nature. The Christian revolution was wrought above all at the knees of women.*

– TOM HOLLAND<sup>257</sup>

*If you suffer, it should not be as a murderer or thief or any other kind of criminal, or even as a meddler.*

– 1 PETER 4:15

Like Daniel and his three friends, Christians can expect to fare well in whatever peaceful space is available for their voice to be heard. Nevertheless, there may be reason to be skeptical that the intellectual acumen of sharp Christian thinkers will be able to make a positive difference in the temporal realm.<sup>258</sup> All the mental prowess in the world is not enough to overcome what many see as Christianity's chief problem: its moral deficiency. For many in today's world, the main issue with Christianity is not that it's incorrect. It's that it's evil.

In his letter to first century exiles, Peter warned Christians about this. Yes, they should expect to suffer, even for doing good. However, they should not suffer as a murderer or a thief or as one who does evil.<sup>259</sup> In that case, their suffering would be well deserved. In the same way, it would be well deserved<sup>260</sup> were they to suffer for being a meddler<sup>261</sup> – one who tries to oversee the affairs of another. In other words, one way for Christianity to show itself to be morally good rather than morally evil is for Christians to concern themselves with their own affairs rather than the affairs of others.

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<sup>257</sup> Holland 535

<sup>258</sup> “Today’s cultured despisers of Christianity do not find its teachings to be intellectually implausible; they regard them as morally reprehensible. Failure to conform to new orthodoxies on race, morality, sexual orientation, and gender identity is the main reason orthodox Christianity is despised today” (Trueman *The Failure of Evangelical Elites*).

<sup>259</sup> κακοποιος

<sup>260</sup> Peter uses *ως* before the first three items he mentions. Then he repeats the *ως* before the final item, thus setting up suffering as a meddler as morally equivalent of suffering for murder, theft, or other evildoing. See Davids 169.

<sup>261</sup> αλλοτρεπισκοπος

By this point in the letter, Peter had already defined what those affairs were. His letter includes a *Haustafel*, or Household Code.<sup>262</sup> It details instructions for citizens, slaves, wives, and husbands. In the last chapter of the book, Peter adds instructions for elders and congregants.<sup>263</sup> In other words, a Christian's affairs are vocationally defined. The business about which they are to be is determined by the station to which they are assigned.

## DISENFRANCHISED WITH THE FRANCHISE

In the United States of America, the station of citizens affords us a variety of possibilities for working for good in the temporal realm. Christians can march, protest, campaign, and write their representatives. At the very least, most Christians sense not just the opportunity but even the obligation to work for the common good by casting their vote.

While such measures are perfectly within bounds for godly citizens, there is good reason to question whether they are the most effective way to work for good in the temporal realm. To begin with, the confidence Americans – including Christians – have historically placed in their vote has let them down.<sup>264</sup> One can make the case that what each political party makes its highest goal has turned out to be its most dismal failure. Conversely each side has succeeded only in accomplishing what the other side most opposes. Historically, conservatives “claim to defend...family values and federalism,” but instead have been successful at “deregulation, globalization, and the protection of titanic economic inequalities.” Meanwhile progressives claim to advance “a shared sense of national destiny and solidarity that should...reduce income inequality.” Meanwhile their main triumph has been “the project of personal and especially sexual autonomy.”<sup>265</sup>

An overemphasis on the power of our vote can even be counterproductive to the public good Christians desire. It can easily become a shortcut that allows us to skirt genuine, sacrificial love for our neighbor.<sup>266</sup> Furthermore, the problems demanding our attention when it comes time to vote tend to be large scale, complex problems that defy easy solutions. Our attention to those problems can

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<sup>262</sup> 1 Peter 2:13–3:7. Peter's Household Code follows a similar pattern to those found in Ephesians and Colossians, but is unique in the fact that it addresses believers' behavior as they live among unbelievers. See Davids 94ff.

<sup>263</sup> 1 Peter 5:1–7

<sup>264</sup> “While evangelicals never enjoyed majority-status in the United States during the twentieth century, they were comfortable enough in the mainline Protestant-dominated world of the 1950s to feel that their moral codes and religious projects had the support of the nation's leaders. By the 1970s, they sensed that they no longer had this support, but they thought they could regain it through an exercise of political power. Now they realize that the cultural changes that they had long opposed are more permanent and far-reaching than they had ever imagined, and they want protection from a society that is likely to be hostile to their values. Their alliance with the Republican Party was not enough to prevent these cultural shifts, but ironically, the more cultural battles they lost even under Republican administrations, the more committed to the GOP they became...” (Williams 48).

<sup>265</sup> Deneen 63

<sup>266</sup> “It is, after all, much easier to vote for a politician who champions child welfare than to adopt a baby born in poverty, to vote for a referendum that would expand health care benefits for seniors than to care for an elderly and infirmed parent, and to rally for racial harmony than to get to know someone of a different race than yours. True responsibility invariably costs. Political participation, then, can and often does amount to an avoidance of responsibility” (Hunter 172–173).

take our attention off the much smaller and more concrete needs of the people around us.<sup>267</sup>

A helpful example of how politics and public good do not always correlate is the protection of the unborn. From the time that *Roe v. Wade* was passed in 1973, abortion became legal in the United States. As the dust from that decision settled, however, public opinion about abortion and the actual abortion rate in our country gradually moved in a pro-life direction. Several factors contributed to this change. Once abortion rights were entrenched in law, pro-life advocates focused their attention on implementing restrictions, such as requiring parental notification for minors, ending partial-birth abortions, and banning federal funding for abortion providers. As contraceptives became more effective and more readily available, there were fewer unintended pregnancies, and younger people came to see them “less like a tragic mistake and more like the consequence of sexual irresponsibility.”<sup>268</sup> The advancement in quality of ultrasound images undoubtedly reinforced the truth that life begins in the womb.<sup>269</sup> Circumstances have now changed with the *Dobbs v. Jackson Women’s Health Organization* decision. Multiple generations of women who are uneasy about abortion but also uneasy about abortion bans may start to vote and act differently than they did when legal access to abortion was assumed. Though it is too early to know the effect that the *Dobbs* decision will have, the public good Christians desire is not primarily that abortion be illegal. It is that abortions not take place. Time will tell how the success of a fifty-year pro-life political effort will impact the success of the ultimate good: fewer unborn babies being killed.

## EXPECTATION IN OUR STATIONS

Thankfully, the station of citizen is not the only one in which we can work for good in the temporal realm. In various other stations, God gives us neighbors in need for whom we can offer sacrificial service. In our station within churches, God gives us fellow Christians with whom we can work to amplify our efforts.

To resume discussion of the issue we just left, voting for the protection of the unborn often feels futile.<sup>270</sup> Nevertheless, our communities and our congregations offer us great opportunity to do real temporal good. Countless lives have been saved through our nation’s crisis pregnancy counseling centers, many of which are operated by Christians. It may be tempting to vilify women who have unplanned

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<sup>267</sup> “It has been observed that the Bible does not say, ‘Love the human race’; instead, it says, ‘Love your neighbor.’ There is a big difference. It is easier to love humanity in the abstract than to love the very real, concrete individual with whom you have to deal every day. The Bible is interested in morality in the concrete, not morality in the abstract. It demands not simply that we vote a certain way, but that we live a certain way” (Veith 86–87).

<sup>268</sup> Putnam and Campbell 411.

<sup>269</sup> As a barometer of this slow cultural shift, the 2011 movie *Juno* came to articulate the attitude toward abortion of an entire generation of young women: not morally opposed to it but certainly uneasy about it; “hardly fervent pro-life supporters, but neither do they favor abortion in all circumstances” (Putnam and Campbell 413).

<sup>270</sup> For example, in the spring 2023 Wisconsin Supreme Court election, abortion rights were a major issue. Candidate Janet Protasiewicz made it very clear during her campaign how she would rule in cases involving abortion bans. In a state in which recent elections have been very close, she won handily.



pregnancies when thinking about abortion an abstract issue. Within our own congregations, however, “we cannot say to the pregnant, fifteen-year-old, ‘Abortion is a sin. It is your problem.’ Rather, it is *our* problem. We ask ourselves what sort of church we would need to be to enable an ordinary person like her to be the sort of disciple Jesus calls her to be.”<sup>271</sup>

In similar fashion, our stations offer Christians the opportunity to provide the equivalent of the crisis pregnancy counseling center and the home for unwed mothers for those who struggle with same-sex attraction and gender dysphoria. They give Christianity the chance to have an answer for *Obergefell* the way it had an answer for *Roe*. They give congregations a concrete way to reimagine definitions of family to better reflect the primacy of our bond of faith over our bond of blood.<sup>272</sup>

The world is not dependent on Christians to decry the failures of the sexual revolution and radical feminism. Secular voices can do that just fine.<sup>273</sup> However, who will model a godly sexual ethic and demonstrate its beauty and wisdom? Who will offer aid to those who have been damaged by sexual liberation’s false promises?<sup>274</sup> The world is not dependent on Christians to dismantle the tenets of Critical Race Theory and radical anti-racism. Secular voices can do that just fine.<sup>275</sup> However, just because one group “thinks racism is everywhere doesn’t mean racism is nowhere.”<sup>276</sup> Who will pursue better solutions for racial harmony and equality?<sup>277</sup>

Some of the excitement that comes from our vocational efforts for public good is that our solutions to these problems will be many and varied.

One should not expect every Christian to agree on the recipe to be followed, or even whether a meal is to be prepared, but every Christian should recognize a hungry neighbor and realize that his Christian confession compels him to help meet the need of that neighbor. Christian activists may not necessarily march in rallies, lobby lawmakers, boycott businesses, or buy billboards, but they will give of themselves for the sake of their fellow creatures around, and most especially, near them.<sup>278</sup>

As we do, what should we expect to happen? In Thessalonica, the Christians were accused of turning the whole world upside down through their revolutionary Pledge of Allegiance: “Jesus is Lord.” The case can be made, however, that the moral good Christians brought to the temporal realm equally contributed to that same

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<sup>271</sup> Hauerwas 81-82

<sup>272</sup> “The most interesting, creative, political solutions we Christians have to offer our troubled society are not new laws, advice to Congress, or increased funding for social programs--although we may find ourselves supporting such national efforts. The most creative social strategy we have to offer is the church. Here we show the world a manner of life the world can never achieve through social coercion or governmental action. We serve the world by showing it something that it is not, namely, a place where God is forming a family out of strangers” (Hauerwas 82–83).

<sup>273</sup> For example,: Louise Perry, *The Case Against the Sexual Revolution*; Mary Harrington, *Feminism against Progress*.

<sup>274</sup> For a compelling and moving example of Christians supporting those who won’t fit in the nuclear family’s mold, see “Finding Intimacy and Community As a Celibate Gay Christian: Art Pereira,” *Theology in the Raw Podcast*, 16 Mar. 2023, [audioboom.com/posts/8262926-finding-intimacy-and-community-as-a-celibate-gay-christian-art-pereira](https://audioboom.com/posts/8262926-finding-intimacy-and-community-as-a-celibate-gay-christian-art-pereira)

<sup>275</sup> For example: Pluckrose and Lindsay; John McWhorter, *Woke Racism*; Noah Rothman, *The Rise of the New Puritans*.

<sup>276</sup> DeYoung

<sup>277</sup> For one Christian author’s proposal of a better solution, see George Yancey, *Beyond Racial Division: A Unifying Alternative to Colorblindness and Anti-Racism*.

<sup>278</sup> Biermann 158

end. There are the closing words of Romans, where we learn how the church in Corinth gathered at the table of Gaius – from the deaconess Phoebe to the city manager Erastus to brother Quartus to the scribe Tertius, who not only had a seat at the table but was given the chance to add his voice to the pages of Holy Writ.<sup>279</sup> Then there’s Paul’s briefest and seemingly least relevant letter, his evangelical encouragement to Philemon about his runaway slave Onesimus – a man whose name was a constant reminder that his economic “usefulness” defined him. Against the backdrop of an entire Testament in which a condemnation of the institution of slavery is conspicuously absent, Paul urges one slaveholder to welcome back one runaway slave, not as a slave but as a brother in the Lord and as a partner in gospel ministry, as a person now useful to both Paul and Philemon in a new and better way. “There may never have been so few words used to turn a whole world upside down.”<sup>280</sup>

Neither Jesus nor his apostles made much attempt to utilize the Empire’s power to make it illegal for people to own slaves, for parents to leave infants in the elements to die, for a man to use the orifices of women, slaves, and boys “to relieve his needs much as he might use a urinal,”<sup>281</sup> or for the powerful to hoard their wealth as the poor starved. Instead, one person at a time, they forged a world in which fewer and fewer wanted to.

The New Testament epistle we have leaned on throughout promotes a similar way of working for public good. Even while urging slaves to submit to their masters, Peter voices the revolutionary idea that their dignity as human beings made it possible for a master to treat them unjustly.<sup>282</sup> Even while urging believing wives to submit to their unbelieving husbands, he voices the revolutionary idea that a wife would even have the right to hold religious beliefs different from her husband’s and to share those beliefs with him.<sup>283</sup>

As we strive for social change, 1 Peter nudges us to drop the pen that scripts master narratives..., to abandon the project of reshaping society from the ground up and instead do as much good as we can from where we are at the time we are there..., and to replace the anger of frustration with the joy of expectation.<sup>284</sup>

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<sup>279</sup> Romans 16:1,22–24. The scene is elaborated in Crouch 111-120

<sup>280</sup> Crouch 180

<sup>281</sup> Holland 279

<sup>282</sup> In his *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle argued it was impossible for a master to treat a slave unjustly: “For where there is nothing in common between ruler and ruled, there can be no friendship between them either, any more than there can be justice. It is like the relation between a craftsman and his tool, or between the soul and the body: all these instruments it is true are benefited by the persons who use them, but there can be no friendship, nor justice, towards inanimate things; indeed not even towards a horse or an ox, nor yet towards a slave as slave. For master and slave have nothing in common: a slave is a living tool, just as a tool is an inanimate slave.”

<sup>283</sup> See Davids 114ff.

<sup>284</sup> Volf 23-24. Volf notes how the desire to upend corrupt systems of power and rebuild from the ground up is built on the so-called “Myth of the Clean Slate.” If a completely new age is to begin, its master narrative must be written on a clean sheet of paper. He then adds, “But the notion of ‘the clean slate’ has proven a dangerous myth. During the French Revolution and in particular later in this century we have learned by bitter experience that the slate cannot be cleaned and that in the process of trying a good deal of new dirt is generated—in fact, rivers of blood and mountains of corpses. Those lessons of history make us wonder whether some wisdom, in addition to accommodation, may be contained in 1 Peter’s failure to challenge the oppressive structures of his day. What we should learn from the text is not, of course, to keep our mouths shut and hands folded, but to make our rhetoric and action more modest so that they can be more effective” (23).

## { CONCLUSION }

### “But if not...”

Thus we arrive at the end, leaving the two sections of this essay – and our citizenship in Christ’s two realms – unbalanced. In each realm, Christians have a goal, a voice, and a way that is *sempiternal*, *subversive*, and *submissive* by virtue of our being *exiled insiders*.<sup>285</sup> In just one realm, however, we have an outcome that is guaranteed. We believe in the Holy Christian Church.

What, then, of the outcome of the temporal kingdom to which we belong? Some would suggest that Christians need bigger ambitions than the ones set forth in this essay.<sup>286</sup> Some still have hopes of “Taking America Back for God.”<sup>287</sup> Some are certain that ship has long sailed.<sup>288</sup> We all must admit we don’t know what our nation’s future holds.

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<sup>285</sup> The “Epistle from Mathetes to Diognetus” (ca. 130-200 A.D.) captures both what ancient Romans thought of Christians and the unique, paradoxical way of life for those who view themselves both as insiders and as exiles, “For the Christians are distinguished from other men neither by country, nor language, nor the customs which they observe. For they neither inhabit cities of their own, nor employ a peculiar form of speech, nor lead a life which is marked out by any singularity. The course of conduct which they follow has not been devised by any speculation or deliberation of inquisitive men; nor do they, like some, proclaim themselves the advocates of any merely human doctrines. But, inhabiting Greek as well as barbarian cities, according as the lot of each of them has determined, and following the customs of the natives in respect to clothing, food, and the rest of their ordinary conduct, they display to us their wonderful and confessedly striking method of life. They dwell in their own countries, but simply as sojourners. As citizens, they share in all things with others, and yet endure all things as if foreigners. Every foreign land is to them as their native country, and every land of their birth as a land of strangers. They marry, as do all [others]; they beget children; but they do not destroy their offspring. They have a common table, but not a common bed. They are in the flesh, but they do not live after the flesh. They pass their days on earth, but they are citizens of heaven. They obey the prescribed laws, and at the same time surpass the laws by their lives. They love all men, and are persecuted by all. They are unknown and condemned; they are put to death, and restored to life. They are poor, yet make many rich; they are in lack of all things, and yet abound in all; they are dishonoured, and yet in their very dishonour are glorified. They are evil spoken of, and yet are justified; they are reviled, and bless; they are insulted, and repay the insult with honour; they do good, yet are punished as evil-doers. When punished, they rejoice as if quickened into life; they are assailed by the Jews as foreigners, and are persecuted by the Greeks; yet those who hate them are unable to assign any reason for their hatred” ([www.earlychristianwritings.com/text/diognetus-roberts.html](http://www.earlychristianwritings.com/text/diognetus-roberts.html)).

<sup>286</sup> Christian pastor Doug Wilson, whose feelings about Christian Nationalism are at least mixed ([dougwils.com/books-and-culture/s7-engaging-the-culture/christian-nationalism-and-other-things-that-skeered-us-bad.html](http://dougwils.com/books-and-culture/s7-engaging-the-culture/christian-nationalism-and-other-things-that-skeered-us-bad.html)), cheekily noted in a Goodreads review dated July 25, 2010, “The full title of [Hunter’s] book is *To Change the World: The Irony, Tragedy & Possibility of Christianity in the Late Modern World*. It ought to have been *To Change the World: But Not Too Much*.”

<sup>287</sup> The title of Andrew Whitehead and Samuel Perry’s critique of Christian Nationalism.

<sup>288</sup> “[D]iscussions around Christian Nationalism are taking place when it has never been less likely to happen” (DeYoung).

That includes what will happen 413 days from now. That’s when this strange and distant land called home will hold its next presidential election. The fact that it’s 413 days away should tell us how much can happen between now and then. When there were 413 days until the previous presidential election, it was September 17, 2019. It was an uneventful day, and life in the temporal realm was calm. That started to change on September 24, 2019, when House Speaker Nancy Pelosi announced the first impeachment inquiry into then President Donald Trump. The announcement caused a change in the latest odds for the following year’s presidential election. The chances of winning went up substantially for the leading Democratic candidate at the time, Senator Elizabeth Warren. A great deal more changed between September 19, 2019, and November 3, 2020. To a large degree, the dust from those tumultuous months and those following the election still hangs thick in the air. If nothing else, this trip down memory lane gives us humility as we think about what might happen in the next 413 days. Who knows? Maybe God will turn the world upside down again.

“But if not...” Those were the three words – the only three words – a British naval officer sent to London via telegram when roughly 350,000 British soldiers were trapped and about to be massacred at the French port of Dunkirk in 1940. Across the English Channel they were instantly recognized as the opening words from the King James Version’s translation of Daniel 3:18. When three young exiles were asked to worship the king’s golden image under threat of death, they refused. As they confessed their faith before the ruler of their temporal realm, they expressed confidence that their God could deliver them from his hand. They then added, “But if not...”

As we contemplate what might happen in the next 413 days for the United States of America, we can join with our three exilic siblings in expressing full confidence in what God can do. We must also add our own “But if not...” to theirs. We have no promise regarding the success or failure of our nation.

As a result of this unbalanced confidence, we take up our work in Christ’s two kingdoms in a deservedly unbalanced way. As much as we care about what happens during the next 413 days for our nation, we care more about maintaining the clarity of our gospel witness during those days and the people who need it. Our goal of serving as combat medics for the casualties of our cultural wars doesn’t change every time the party in power does. Our vocal insistence that “Jesus is Lord” will always be subversive so long as Caesar wants to claim otherwise. Our willing submission will continue to be the way in which our crucified King shows the strength of his arm. So for as many days as our King gives us, let our work and witness be unbalanced toward that kingdom for which no “But if not...” is needed.



## RECOMMENDED READING

### HOW DID WE GET HERE?

Trueman, Carl R. *The Rise and Triumph of the Modern Self: Cultural Amnesia, Expressive Individualism, and the Road to Sexual Revolution*. Wheaton: Crossway, 2020.

*A sweeping review of modern philosophy in the West with the goal of explaining how we've arrived at our current cultural moment, especially with regards to issues of sexuality and gender identity. Trueman also has a more concise version entitled Strange New World: How Thinkers and Activists Redefined Identity and Sparked the Sexual Revolution.*

Holland, Tom. *Dominion: How the Christian Revolution Remade the World*. New York: Basic Books, 2019.

*A novelistic retelling of the story of Christianity in the West, aimed to demonstrate that nearly all Western thought and life has been and remains under Christianity's influence.*

Douthat, Ross. *Bad Religion: How We Became a Nation of Heretics*. New York: Free Press, 2012.

*A review and analysis of American Christianity from the 1950s onward. It traces the development of a handful of strands of Christian faith from their origins to their modern manifestations and offers suggestions for American Christianity as it looks to find its way.*

### WHAT IS GOING ON?

Pluckrose, Helen and James Lindsay. *Cynical Theories: How Activist Scholarship Made Everything about Race, Gender, and Identity*. Durham: Pitchstone Publishing, 2020.

*A helpful overview of various manifestations of social justice theory and activism for understanding the origins of much of modern thought. The authors' prescription for the disease they diagnose is the pure application of secular liberalism.*

Deneen, Patrick J. *Why Liberalism Failed*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2018.

*A helpful counterpart to Cynical Theories, it seeks to expose the faults of secular liberalism and demonstrate why the excesses of both its progressive and its conservative manifestations are two sides of the same coin.*

### HOW DO CHRISTIANS ENGAGE?

Hunter, James Davison. *To Change the World: The Irony, Tragedy, and Possibility of Christianity in the Late Modern World*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2010.

*Written in 2010 (which almost feels like ancient history), almost everyone who writes on Christian social engagement still feels the need to engage with Hunter's work. Part 2 of the book is especially helpful for tracing how power dynamics (i.e. politics) have come to permeate every facet of life and how they are inadequate for addressing society's most pressing problems.*

Veith, Jr., Gene Edward. *Loving God with All Your Mind: Thinking as a Christian in the*

*Postmodern World*. Wheaton: Crossway Books, 1987.

*Written in 1987, it doesn't address the most current issues in public thought and life. Nevertheless, the approach to Christian social critique that it advocates is as relevant today as it was then, and it is helpful to hear it coming from a Confessional Lutheran voice.*

Watkin, Christopher. *Biblical Critical Theory: How the Bible's Unfolding Story Makes Sense of Modern Life and Culture*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2022.

*An extensive analysis of modern thought and life designed to follow in the footsteps of Augustine's City of God. Its analysis is organized according to the biblical narrative (rather than topically). After reading through from start to finish, it would serve as a helpful reference work for addressing specific topics as needs arise.*

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