The views expressed in Stromata reflect the personal judgments of the individual authors. They do not necessarily represent the position of the Executive Committee, Editors, Student Senate, or the Student Body. Individual authors retain responsibility for accuracy of all references.

Back issues of Stromata from 2001 to the present are available online at our new website: www.calvinseminary.edu/stromata.

All printed issues of Stromata are held at the Hekman Library of Calvin College in Grand Rapids, Michigan.
# Table of Contents

**Editorial**  
4

**Poetry**  
Autumn  
Diana Burns  
5

**Sermons**  
Living the Good Life  
Matthew Burns  
6

Strangers in a Strange Land  
Michael Kornelis  
13

So, You are a King?  
John C. Medendorp  
19

**Theological Reflections**  
Called to Rejection  
Ricardo Tavárez  
27

**Exegetical Papers**  
“God was with Joseph”: Genesis 39  
Kwang Il Choi  
33

**Essays**  
The Book of Exodus: Pedagogy for a Youth Ministry of Freedom  
Adrian de Lange  
43

The Lives of the Saints: An Education in the Good Life  
Mark VanderWerf  
55

Shalom-Directed Justice and the Church  
Adam Van Gelder  
76

Martin Luther on Vocation: Bridging the Gap between Creation and the Eschaton  
Reita Yazawa  
98
Doing things in community is a deep part of human nature. The book of Proverbs affirms that observation when it references iron sharpening iron (27:17), a passage we hear so often it has become a Christian cliché. Despite its familiarity, we often fail to apply this profound truth, leaving us unrefined and dulled. Seminary life gives us the ability to engage in Christian community in a special way. Here we have an opportunity to spend years of our lives with others who have similar goals and interests. Along the way, our education is indelibly marked by those around us.

The climate of higher education is often characterized as one which creates a false reality, at least a step removed from the “real life” out there beyond graduation. One hears comments about yearnings for “real” ministry, “real” community. But this stigma is hollow. The people around us are not artificial. The time that passes is not fake.

So embrace this time fully. Allow iron to sharpen iron in every way possible: in the classroom and student center, at the library and local restaurant, in words spoken and written. This publication is meant to help us sharpen each other as a community through collecting and refining each others’ ideas. Please use it to soak in the lives and lessons of others in our community. You will not be disappointed.

This edition of the Stromata lives up to its name, which alludes to Clement’s Stromateis or “Miscellanies.” Clement’s title refers to those little, random things placed under a bed or stroma. The title of our journal, which literally (and comically) translates as “mattresses,” intends to communicate the same meaning as Clement’s “Miscellanies.” But the various works gathered here show a providential amount of congruity. Strong themes emerge including: the “good life,” Christians as strangers, theological education, and the relation of the present to the eschaton. Across these sub-themes, this issue could be summarized as: prioritizing Christ and properly addressing culture. I trust you will enjoy reading it as much as John and I have enjoyed editing it.

Thanks to those who made submissions. And a personal thank you to John Medendorp, who so cordially allowed me to join in the task of editing. The Stromata has been blessed by his continued passion as editor these past few years. Enjoy the Stromata!

— JCS
Autumn
Diana Burns

This eve of autumn settles, cools, and sobers summer's fervor. As days kindle into days, the Lord takes up the garment of earth and mends its leaves, threading cinnamon and cidered sunlight through their veins. He drapes His art on pillared oak and aspen and girds the birch and maple with riotous design. Then providential skill lets the trees unravel, framing changing galleries whose paths beckon me to walk them. I walk and watch squirrels scurry to store up treasures of acorns, and I see new gems that ripen, ruddy and round, upon some yet-green tree. It is the turning, the falling, the quieting transience of things and my breath frosting into sight that remind me all is given and taken and given. Then the wind, softly shuffling, scatters prayers like autumnal seeds into my bones: "Give us this day our daily 'enough' that yields sufficient throughout the winter.”

For now, we reap from spring's planted seed and summer's watered field, gathering the gifts to keep and store.

Change is the harvest that gleans the worth from what was sown. Surely His purposes will ripen fast and rise like October's cranberries: Though their fields are flooded, lost within a bog, a plenty is proved by the marvel that pebbles across the pond.

The water turns to wine.
Leonardo Da Vinci spent three years of his life painting the picture we now famously refer to as “The Last Supper”. Even if you’ve never seen the original, we can all picture Jesus at the long table with his disciples extended out on either side of him. Da Vinci brought to life the scene where Jesus tells his most trusted followers that one of them is about to betray him. Across the table the disciples’ various reactions are painted with vividness. Right in the middle of the painting, with John on his left and Thomas on his right, is Jesus. In the painting we see today both of Jesus’ hands are empty. His left hand is palm up and outstretched invitingly. His right hand rests on the table, palm down and fingers open, as if reaching out for some invisible object. There’s a story that explains more about Jesus’ right hand. Da Vinci asked a trusted friend to observe his progress while painting the last supper. The friend was impressed and remarked that the cup in Jesus’ right hand was especially beautiful.

Da Vinci then began to paint out the cup in Jesus’ right hand. Confused, the friend asked Leonardo why he was removing the cup that he had just said he found so striking. Leonardo replied, “nothing must distract from the figure of Christ.” Da Vinci’s concern was that his painting show Christ. His friend’s compliment on the cup in Jesus’ hand meant that something was drawing attention from Jesus Christ himself. Da Vinci’s brushstrokes aimed for more than just painting. Da Vinci took up the brush so that his audience would see Jesus.

In the letter to the Colossian Christians, Paul doesn’t use a brush, but a stylus to paint Jesus. If we were to examine this letter in isolated bits we might miss just how prominently Paul is leading us to see Jesus. When we take a

---

step back however, we see that Paul is his own kind of Leonardo Da Vinci, commissioned to write a letter to an audience who needs to see Jesus. Paul paces his room in Rome, the clinking of his iron leg shackle a reminder of the danger that the Colossian Christians may face. Epaphras, a ministerial colleague of Paul’s who founded the church in Colossae, sits on a bench in Paul’s room. Paul is imprisoned under house arrest. Epaphras has come to see Paul and Timothy for help with the fledgling Colossian congregations. Paul’s brow furrows as he listens to Epaphras: “I left as soon as I was able to get passage, Paul.” Epaphras continues: “Things are not nearly as bad as what I hear about the churches in Galatia, or Corinth, but all the same I am wary of these new teachers, they’re gaining traction with many in our congregation. There is talk of philosophies, and secret teachings, and even suggestions that Jesus Christ was only the starting point—that true believers must look elsewhere for deeper spiritual growth.”

Paul’s concentrated pacing stops abruptly as he reaches the end of his chain-sack. The heavy chain, being cooped up in a dark room, these are all too potent metaphors for the danger of false teachings and their power to put God’s liberated people back in the darkness of bondage. Paul hears Epaphras’s concern, his joy at the wonderful growth that the Colossians have experienced, the way that these Gentiles have become worshippers of the true God by rejecting idols and cults, their joy and genuine love for one another as a community of believers who endure ridicule from outsiders. Paul knows the human tendency to want a little something extra though. The Colossians are not the first Christians to begin with Jesus Christ and then along the way start to look for a little something extra, something new and exciting, something they can control. Paul sees the Colossian Church, surrounded by the worship of gods like Cybele and Attis, he knows the Gentile fear of spiritual forces, the prevalence of magic, astrology, and zodiac. He can see gentile priests hurting their bodies as a means to enhance magic and to
manipulate gods or spiritual forces. As Epaphras shares his concern, Paul knows that these false teachings started with a desire to grow in knowledge of God, and to live fully in God’s life. Paul thinks of his own imprisonment and how much the gospel of Jesus Christ chafes at life in Greco-Roman society. Wanting these believers to continue in their new journey of genuine faith, Paul begins to dictate a letter to an audience seeking wisdom and knowledge.

Nearly 2000 years after this letter was written, people today are still seeking wisdom and knowledge. Though our quest for enlightenment doesn’t involve pagan animal sacrifice and elaborate and ecstatic dance routines, we too want knowledge and wisdom. Take A. C. Grayling, an English philosopher who taught at both Oxford and the University of London. Over the last 30 years, A. C. Grayling has worked to compile knowledge and wisdom from the greatest men and women of history into a book. “The Good Book” as he calls it, was inspired by the Bible, but in his opinion does what the Bible fails to do. His good book gives human beings credit for all the knowledge they’ve developed over the years. Where the Bible goes wrong, according to Dr. Grayling, is in giving credit to some divine source for all wisdom and knowledge:

I noticed there is quite a contrast between those philosophies that derive from religious inspiration and those that derive from a humanist perspective, like Plato and Aristotle, Buddhism, Confucius, etc…When you contrast those philosophies with…Christianity…I saw the humanist-derived ethical outlooks tended to take their start from the most generous view of human nature, and the belief that human life is very short, and we must understand how to make good lives for ourselves… Whereas religious systems premise themselves on relationships between man and deity.

As Dr. Grayling sees it, thinking about God distracts us from uncovering real wisdom, finding the good life on our own. Dr. Grayling assumes, of course, that the Bible cannot be
true, since God does not exist. It’s almost as if Dr. Grayling has flipped Da Vinci’s concern on it’s head—he’s worried that looking at Jesus will distract us from seeing the cup in his hand, so he tries to paint over the figure of Christ, leaving only an elegant cup in the center of his painting.

Although most of us wouldn’t go to the extreme of writing our own Bibles full of worldly wisdom, we still understand Dr. Grayling’s quest. Like the ancient Greco-Roman world, we are surrounded by a culture of enhancement and self-actualization. Our longing is the same as the Colossians—to know how to live well. The good life, as philosophers call it, can be anything from social acceptance to the power to control circumstances—perfect bodies, comfortable living, success, achievement, respect, autonomy, and independence. But some of us know that the good life is elsewhere. As Christians we know that the real good life, as Paul puts it in our text, is walking in a way that is pleasing to God—it’s living in the good news that Jesus Christ has forgiven us and made us able to live for him. Though we may begin here, like the Colossians, sometimes we’re not sure that Jesus Christ is quite enough. Our lives become “Gospel, and…” Jesus Christ and comfortable living, Jesus Christ and watching your own back, Jesus Christ and success, or achievement, or self-enhancement.

We can be tempted to think of each of ourselves as Saturn V rockets. Those huge and powerful NASA rockets the United States built in the 60’s and 70’s during the space race. Our potential lies out amongst the stars, maybe even as far as the moon. And the Gospel becomes the first and biggest stage of the rocket. Jesus Christ has the power to get us off the ground, take us way up, and even break gravity. But it’s only the first stage, after the gospel runs out we need something else—another boost—not quite as powerful, but still potent enough to take us to our true potential. For a time we might look to Christ, but our tendency, like that of the Colossians, is to look for something more than Jesus.
With a skill like that of Leonardo Da Vinci, Paul crafts a letter to the Colossians who were looking for something more than Jesus. Having begun with a genuine faith and hope in Jesus Christ, the young Colossian church was being tempted to look to the philosophies of the day. They began to adopt rituals and religious rites that blended their solid trust in Jesus with other religious ingredients into a potent cocktail for spiritual growth. These new teachers were playing to the Colossian desire to grow in knowledge and wisdom. As a result, the Colossian church was beginning to question what Epaphras had taught them, beginning to question whether it was the whole story. Perhaps Jesus Christ isn’t enough. Maybe Epaphras thought that Christ was enough and just didn’t know that there was more to figure out on our own. Or worse, maybe he did know that there was more than Christ and simply didn’t tell us how to get to the next level.

Paul, right from the beginning of his letter, addresses these beloved Christians by noting their concerns. As they read the first few verses, Paul lets them know that he, Epaphras, Timothy and the rest of his colleagues pray for them. Paul is thrilled to hear about their faith, and their love that is genuine—truly, as Paul sees that Jesus Christ has changed them. Paul commends Epaphras and endorses the work he’s done and verifies the truth of the teaching that Epaphras has given them. Paul wants the Colossians to know how much they are cared for. And then, before even addressing particular issues, Paul gives the Colossians the key to the whole letter. In verses 9-14, here in our text this morning, Paul writes out his prayer for the young church.

Paul tells the Colossians that he’s been praying unceasingly for them. Unceasingly. Paul has heard about them and the first thing he does is gather his team and pray for them. But why record what it is in particular that Paul’s been praying? Because it shows the Colossians that Paul understands their longings. Paul knows that they want to grow. He knows that they want to walk more and more in
God’s ways, but that they face a lot of confusion as to how to do that. Paul wants them to know that he understands Christ does not seem like enough. But the Holy Spirit has taught Paul that the knowledge people need, the wisdom that will lead to the good life is not in Jesus Christ “and.” All true knowledge of God comes from God, just as Jesus Christ was not merely human but Emmanuel—God with humanity, God come near. Jesus Christ is wisdom, but in order to know this, and to know that it’s enough, it takes the work of the Holy Spirit. So Paul prays because he knows that if the Colossian Christians are to be satisfied the Holy Spirit must do it. That same Spirit guides Paul’s words so that he draws the minds and hearts of the Colossians back to Jesus Christ. He assures them that the God who saved them from their sin is the same God that can give them everything they need. In fact, God has already given them everything they need. God doesn’t wish for the Colossians to seek out hidden truths, to figure out for themselves what the good life is. Instead, God has given them his will for their lives—a deep and abiding understanding of the picture of Jesus Christ and all that he means for the universe and for them. Paul ends his prayer by assuring the Colossians that they are fully qualified. They have true wisdom for the good life now, God’s power by the Holy Spirit to live the good life, and an inheritance for eternal life with Jesus Christ in his kingdom. Paul prays so that the Colossians would be assured that Jesus Christ is sufficient.

Paul’s prayer is that we too would be assured that Jesus Christ is sufficient. The Holy Spirit saw fit to preserve this letter through the ages, when we read Paul’s mail to Colossae, we know God intends it for us. Though Paul has long since left this earth, Jesus Christ who is with the Father right now prays for us. Jesus Christ knows that we today still live in a world striving for wisdom in all the wrong places. Jesus knows that, like the Colossians, we are sometimes tempted to look for something to supplement or enhance our faith in him.
When we read the Old Testament, we see foreshadows of Jesus Christ who had not yet come. When we read the gospels we see Jesus Christ the human being who walked the earth and showed us what God is really like. And when we read letters like Colossians we see ourselves as people who come after Jesus, trusting in him by faith and hoping for the day when we will see him face to face and live with him in his kingdom on earth. In the meantime, God knows that building our hope on Jesus Christ is a hard business. So God gives us the wisdom to walk the good life, and he gives us his strength in order to do it. As we read Paul’s words this morning, God wants to remind us that even today, even thousands of years after Paul prayed these words to the Colossians, Jesus Christ is still sufficient. God is saying to us this morning, “Look at the painting of Jesus I’ve preserved for all of you in the Bible, it does not crack or fade, it does not chip or peel like the canvases and walls of human work.”

The Gospel—the good news about Jesus Christ—is not a powerful rocket that gets us on our way to our full potential. Rather the gospel is like the soil in which we must live and grow always. God has shown us who Jesus Christ really is. He continues to draw us back to look on him again as the one who has delivered us from the domain of darkness and transferred us to his kingdom—Jesus Christ has given us redemption, forgiveness for our sin and the power to live the good life. This good news is sufficient.

Amen.
Strangers in a Strange Land
I Peter 4:12-19
Michael Kornelis

We are a nation of immigrants. If you yourself did not immigrate here your parents, grandparents, or great grandparents probably did. Maybe you know for yourself what it’s like to be an immigrant, a stranger in a strange land. If not, imagine what it must have been like for your family before you. How disorienting it must have been not being able to read the signs on the street, how frustrating not being able to understand what everyone was saying, how uncomfortable not knowing the social norms and taboos. Imagine how this discomfort must have been exacerbated by native citizen’s resentment toward those immigrants who didn’t assimilate quite fast enough or didn’t assimilate at all! “Why don’t you speak our language?” they carp. “Why don’t you dress like us?” “Why don’t you eat like us?” “Why are you so strange?!” If you are an immigrant you know what this is like. If not, your family before you did. It’s hard. It’s hard to be a stranger in a strange land.

Well, if you look at 1:1 you’ll see that Peter addresses this letter to immigrants, to strangers in a strange land. And these early Christians were strange; they were very strange. You probably would have thought them strange, too. Imagine inviting a friend out to a restaurant. He says, “No, I don’t eat at restaurants.” “How strange,” you think. So, you invite him to the movies. He says, “No, I don’t go to the movies.” “How strange,” you think. Finally in one last effort you invite him over to watch the big game. “No, I don’t watch sports.” “How very strange,” you think. At this point you might get a little annoyed with this friend. You might even begin to resent him.

Well, the fledgling Christians to whom Peter was writing wouldn’t eat at the temples, the restaurants of antiquity. They

---

wouldn’t go to the theatre or Satyr Plays, the movies of antiquity. And they certainly wouldn’t go to the gladiatorial games, the sports of antiquity. So naturally, people started to resent the Christians, even persecute them. They thought them strange, very strange.

So what tender words of encouragement does Peter have for these ostracized and suffering Christians? “Do not be surprised as if something strange were happening to you.” Not a very pastorally sensitive response, is it? What if, because you were a Christian, your boss fired you, or your own neighbors vandalized your home, or violently assaulted you! You’d be upset. And then, looking to be consoled, what if, when you told your pastor about what happened, he bluntly responded, “Are you surprised? You don’t think something strange happened to you, do you?” You might be a little off-put to say the least. Well, don’t be alarmed, Peter is going to console these suffering Christians—he’s going to console us—but first, let’s allow him to make his point.

Peter’s comment here, though seemingly insensitive, is rhetorically quite clever; but unfortunately the effect doesn’t translate so well into English. Let me explain. Peter was being very particular with his word choice. He chose unusual and unique words for “surprise” and “strange.” Both words come from the Greek word *xenos* which means “strange or foreign,” referring to someone who was “from out of town,” so to speak, someone who was “not from around here.” So Peter’s words are not so much insensitive as they are a subtle reminder to these bewildered Christians that, just as he addressed them in the letter’s opening, they are foreigners, aliens, immigrants; they are strangers in a strange land. “So don’t be too surprised,” explains Peter, “when people treat you like you’re from out of town, like you’re not from around here.”

Now, what Peter says next is a little radical. No, I take that back. Its very radical. Peter suggests to these Christians that insofar as they share in Christ’s suffering they should rejoice, and not just rejoice a little bit, but *greatly* rejoice!
Then he goes on to suggest to these Christian that when they are insulted for Christ’s name they are blessed…blessed! What a wild and radical suggestion: those who are suffering should rejoice; those who are insulted are blessed. If we didn’t know any better we might think the last unruly mob to get their hands on Peter literally beat the sense out of him. But Peter was not the first to make this radical suggestion, no, he’s quoting someone. “Blessed are you when people insult you because of me, rejoice and be glad,” said our Lord from the mountain top.

So how can this be? How is it that when we are insulted we are blessed, when we suffer we are to rejoice? Our Lord said it, but doesn’t this seem a little counterintuitive? Well, Peter helps us to make some sense of it. You see, its not that suffering in and of itself is a blessing, nor is it the case that suffering in and of itself is cause for rejoicing. Of course not. But when we share in Christ’s suffering, when we are insulted for Christ’s name’s sake, we are blessed and rejoice if for no other reason than we are sharing in Christ and his holy name. “To the degree that you share the sufferings of Christ, keep on rejoicing,” Peter urges, “so that also at the revelation of his glory you may rejoice with exaltation.” The inference here is that one who shares in Christ’s suffering will also share in his exaltation. Put another way, the one who participates in Christ’s suffering now, will likewise participate in Christ’s exaltation later, on that glorious day when he comes to judge the living and the dead. We are blessed when we share in Christ, and we rejoice when we participate in him. That is all Peter is saying: to be in Christ is to be blessed. Incidentally though, to be in Christ means suffering.

You see, Christ was from out of town; he wasn’t from around here. He was an immigrant, a stranger in a strange land. Everything about him was different. He spoke differently. “Love your enemies; bless those who curse you.” He ate differently, sharing his table with prostitutes and tax collectors. Come to think of it, he even walked differently,
on water and through walls. Yes, he was strange; he was very strange. And just like any stranger from out of town who doesn’t assimilate, he was resented. “The darkness did not comprehend him, his own did not receive him.”

“Why don’t you talk like us?” the world clamored. “Why don’t you eat like us?” “Why don’t you act like us?” “Why are you so strange?!” And when he wouldn’t talk like them, eat like them, act like them, they inevitably treated him like the stranger he was. As a stranger, they made him suffer.

Christ was a stranger indeed. And so, to be in Christ, to share in him, partake of him, have union with him, to be his brother, his sister, his disciple, his slave, to be anything like him is to be a stranger. And incidentally, to be a stranger is to suffer. So if you are suffering like him, you are to rejoice because you share in him. If you are insulted for his name’s sake, you are blessed because you share that name. Just like fire tests the quality of gold, explains Peter, suffering tests the quality of our faith. Our suffering is proof positive that we are like Christ. “Well,” you ask, “if I want to be like Christ, should I eagerly seek out suffering, any kind of suffering?” Well... not so fast.

A man once told me that he felt happily affirmed when people insulted him, when people hated him, because, after all, it only meant he was like Christ, right? Didn’t Christ say “if they hated me they will hate you too?” And doesn’t Peter reiterate that those who are insulted are blessed? Well, the problem was that this man was a bit arrogant, and often mean in a curiously effortless way. So when he told me this the immediate thought in my head was “well maybe they insult and hate you because you’re like Christ, or maybe you’re just a jerk!” Peter, himself wary of this mistake, immediately makes the clarification that no one ought to suffer “as a murderer, or a thief, or evildoer, or troublesome meddler.” To put it plainly, no one should suffer because they’re actually a jerk. “No, no, no,” says Peter, “this is not the sort of suffering Christ was talking about.”
Christ was talking about a different kind of suffering, the sort of suffering a stranger experiences when they don’t belong. Suffering as a murderer, or a thief, or evildoer, or troublesome meddler, as a “jerk” is the sort of suffering that is common to the world. Christ was talking about the kind of suffering that sets us apart as Christians, as strangers in the world. Even though the New Testament is all about Christians, it might surprise you that the name “Christian” only ever occurs three times in the Bible, twice in Acts, and then this one time here. You see, believers were hesitant to identify themselves as “Christian” because initially this term was a pejorative one, used by antagonists to insult them. But, all this name “Christian” means is that a person is associated with or committed to whoever this “Christ” character may be. “So, do not be ashamed of this name,” encourages Peter, “but glorify God in it.” You are blessed when they insult you by calling you a Christian, because they are identifying you with Christ! Rejoice, when you suffer as a Christian, because you are suffering with Christ! When the world persecutes you because it judges you as a Christian, as a stranger, like Christ who doesn’t belong, “isn’t from around here,” rejoice! You are blessed! Because their judgement is right on! You are a stranger, you are like Christ, you don’t belong, and you’re not from around here. No, God has judged you and set you apart, you are a saint, you are holy! This is what Peter means when he says, “it is time for judgement to begin with the household of God.”

Now, let me make it perfectly clear that Peter does not mean that these Christians are suffering because it’s judgement day and God is punishing them. It is judgement day but God is not punishing them. Absolutely not. On the contrary, God’s judgement is that they are Christians, associated with his only begotten Son, Jesus Christ our Lord. And, through this association with his Son, God adopts them —God adopts us—to be his cherished children. But don’t forget that through this association with Christ we also inevitably suffer as strangers in the world. You see, to be
united with Christ is to be loved by God, and hated by the world. Being judged righteous in God’s eyes is to be judged a stranger in the world’s eyes. So, when God judges us as Christians, made righteous through his Son, we are inevitably going to suffer. But not because God is punishing us, but because the world is punishing us. The world does not take kindly to strangers, it did not take kindly to Christ, and so if you are anything like him it will not take kindly to you either. “So, if this is what judgement looks like for the Christian whom God loves, suffering because the world, not God, is punishing them,” muses Peter, “what will judgement look like for the sinner, the Godless man who does not obey the gospel, the one who will suffer because God, not the world, will punish them?”

Judgement day has begun, Peter announces, and no matter what judgement falls on you, you’re going to suffer. Do not be surprised at this; do not think it strange. But the question is this: why, how, and at whose hands are you suffering? Are you suffering as a murder, a thief, an evildoer, a meddler, a jerk? Are you suffering according to the will of the world? Or are you suffering as a foreigner, an alien, an immigrant, a stranger in a strange land, a Christian? Are you suffering according to the will of God? “Because,” Peter assures us, “if you suffer according to the will of God you shall entrust your soul to a faithful Creator.” The same omnipotent hands that created and sustain the vast cosmos created and sustain you. “Your soul is entrusted to a faithful Creator.” So although we suffer, although it is judgement day, we are tremendously comforted. And why is this, how can this be? “Because,” says the Catechism, “In all our distress and persecution we turn our eyes to the heavens and confidently await as judge the very One who has already stood trial in our place before God and so has removed the whole curse from us. All his enemies and ours he will condemn to everlasting punishment: but we his chosen ones he will take along with him into the joy and glory of heaven” (Q&A 52). Amen.
So, You are a King? ¹
Psalm 93, John 18:33-37
John C. Medendorp

According to the liturgical calendar, today is Christ the King Sunday, the day when we celebrate the rule of Jesus Christ over all the earth, and his enthronement on high above all earthly powers. Christ the King Sunday is the last Sunday of the liturgical year before we start the new year on the First Sunday of Advent. Christ the King Sunday is the last Sunday of the Season of Ordinary Time. It is the culmination of this twenty-eight-week long season that spans the time between Pentecost and Advent, a season which often takes the back seat to what we sometimes consider to be more important things, like summer vacation, and the fall semester. The Season of Ordinary Time tends to be just that: ordinary time. Nothing exceptional happens. Sometimes we do sermon series to fill the time. But we often take a hiatus from things like Sunday School and Bible Studies so people can enjoy the summer weather and fall sports. And we sort of put liturgical life on hold until Advent.

But the Season of Ordinary Time is very important. The purpose of the lengthy season is for the church to focus on spiritual growth in light of the things that happen during the rest of the liturgical year. The incarnation, life, crucifixion, resurrection, and ascension of our Savior culminate in Pentecost, when Christ sends the Holy Spirit to guide his followers. The Season of Ordinary Time is meant to explore what that means for us. It is a time for the church to focus on its spiritual life, developing proper habits of spiritual discipline, obedience, submission, cultivating the fruit of the Spirit, and learning to live as Christ’s followers. And this all culminates in the last Sunday of the liturgical year, in which we remember and reflect and celebrate the fact that Christ is our King; that Jesus of Nazareth, the Messiah, the Son of

¹ Originally preached at Fuller Ave CRC for Christ the King Sunday, November 25, 2012.
God, is enthroned above the nations and rules over the entire world, the entire cosmos, from his glorious seat at the right hand of the Father. The entire liturgical calendar, from Advent to Christmas to Easter to Pentecost, builds up to this one truth: that Christ is King.

And we have before us today two very different texts which give us very different pictures of Christ’s kingship. The first is Psalm 93, which presents our Lord as robed in majesty and armed with strength. He is established on a throne that extends from eternity to infinity, a throne so secure that the foundation of the earth rests on it, a rule so mighty that even the raging waters of the sea obey it. “The Lord on high is mighty. Your statutes, O Lord, stand firm; holiness adorns your house for endless days.”

And on the other hand, we have John 18, where Jesus stands before Pilate, the representative of Caesar, who exerts his rule across the known world. This little Jewish man from the back country of Nazareth, accused of political unrest and religious heresy by his own people, standing before the most powerful person in the land of Israel. And here, in this ironic little twist, the representative of the most powerful political figure in the world asks the carpenter’s son: “Are you the king of the Jews?”

The question seems preposterous. You can almost imagine Pilate, angry at being woken up so early to deal with something so ridiculous. His voice filled with scorn, as he asks this beaten and bedraggled little man whether or not he is a king.

You know, we here in 21st century America really don’t have a very good understanding of what a king is. Sure, there are still kings and queens around today, but they are bound by parliaments and constitutions and international observers. They have checks and balances. They have people keeping an eye on them, keeping them in line. In earlier times, of course, this wasn’t the case. Kings and queens were the ultimate power. They were completely autocratic rulers. They did as they pleased, and you could only hope that what
they pleased wasn’t detrimental to your health. The Jews knew what a king was. They knew all too well.

Psalm 93 is considered to be one of the earliest Psalms in the Bible. It looks a lot like Canaanite psalms to Baal, the kind of the Canaanite gods, who fought an epic battle with the sea to establish his rule. The Canaanites viewed Baal as this type of autocratic ruler, who did whatever he wanted, and so they made sacrifices to him and composed psalms of praise to him, so that he would be nice to them. This view reflected their understanding of “king” at the time. They were surrounded by these powerful empires—Egypt, Assyria, Babylon—they all had kings who were supposedly gods, and were trying to exert their rule over the land. So a king, for the Canaanites around the time that the Israelites wrote Psalm 93, is the ruler over the land, the highest god of the gods, the highest king over the kings. So you pay tribute to him and sacrifice to him and compose songs of praise to his name, to earn his favor.

And in Jesus’ time, too, over 1000 years later, the Jews had a concept of king. The history of Israel was characterized by revolts and uprisings. You can see some of it all the way through Kings and Chronicles. You see, once somebody became king, the only way you could become king was to be related to them or kill them. So if you didn’t like the king, or wanted to be the king but weren’t related to him, you had to kill him. And this happens several times throughout the history of Israel and Judah, especially after the exile to Babylon. Less than a century before Jesus, in fact, the Maccabees had ruled the land of Israel after overthrowing the Persians, who had overthrown the Egyptians. Rome took over in 63BC, and Herod the Great, an Arab, was appointed King of Judah by the Romans about 30 years before Jesus was born. Herod was so paranoid about his family taking power from him that he resorted to killing the ones he didn’t trust. But these were little fish compared to the big man: Caesar, the Emperor of Rome, ruler of the known world, son of the gods. The ruler of Rome set himself
up as a god, like the old-time kings of Egypt and Babylon and Persia and Greece. The kings of the provinces all over the Roman Empire built temples to Caesar. Herod built at least three temples to Augustus while he was ruler of Judah. Caesar was the big man, the king of kings, the lord of lords, descended from the gods themselves.

So what does this mean? Kings were terrible. So what does it mean that Christ is our King?

It’s really kind of interesting to see how the Israelites take over these ideas and change them to fit their theology. When the scriptures speak of God as king, they are responding to cultural norms of their day. Before the Israelites come into Canaan, before they’re exposed to these ideas that Baal is the king of the gods, they don’t really view Yahweh, the God of Israel, as a king. Or at least, they don’t talk about him that way. If you read all the way through the first five books of the Bible—through Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy—you’ll only find a handful of places where it refers to Yahweh as a king, maybe three. But when the Israelites move into Canaan, all of a sudden they’re surrounded by people who are saying that their god Baal is king of the world, that Baal rules over the seas and keeps them under control, that Baal thunders in the highest heavens and the waters heed his command. And Israel says, “Oh no, you’ve got that wrong.” And they start to develop an understanding of Yahweh, of the Lord God Almighty, as king of the world. Not Baal, but Yahweh. Unlike Baal, Yahweh’s throne is established from eternity. Unlike Baal, Yahweh is holy. Unlike Baal, Yahweh keeps the world secure. Unlike Baal, Yahweh’s statutes stand firm. Yahweh’s house is adorned with holiness for endless days.

And so we really get this picture of Yahweh as a stabilizing force, on whom the whole creation rests secure. And that’s the picture we move forward with as we shift our focus to this text in John. In the face of all of these kings who fight and kill and steal and create turmoil, the God of Israel, Yahweh, the Lord God Almighty, is steadfast. He is
sure. He is mighty. His statutes stand firm. His throne is established throughout eternity, never changing, never ending, never moving.

And here, in the 18th chapter of the Gospel of John, the evangelist puts the Son of the eternal God whose kingdom never ends face-to-face with the ambassador of Caesar, the self-proclaimed king of kings and lord of lords. And Pontius Pilate, still angry that he’s been woken up to deal with this little carpenter’s boy who thinks he is a Messiah, asks Jesus “Are you the king of the Jews?”

And Jesus responds, as he often does, with a question of his own: “Is that your own idea,” he asks, “or did others talk to you about me?” Jesus looks Pilate right in the face and accuses him of being manipulated by others. Pilate is not in control here, and Jesus wants him to know that. You see, throughout this narrative, John wants to show us that Jesus is not the helpless victim of events that are out of his control. Jesus is not just some guy who happened to wake up on the wrong side of fate. Jesus is choosing to go down this path. Jesus is submitting to the will of his Father. Jesus is an active agent who is choosing to follow this difficult path.

But Pilate doesn’t see it yet. Pilate is tired. He wants to go back to bed. And he knows that Jesus has been brought here because of the accusations of the Chief Priests and the Jewish rulers, and he knows that he doesn’t completely understand their ways, and he’s not really interested. So he responds to Jesus’ subtle accusation by asking the rhetorical question. “Am I a Jew?” Do I look like one of you? I don’t understand your weird little practices. “Your own people and chief priests handed you over to me. What is it you have done?” Pilate wants to get to the bottom of this. Tell me what you did, and we’ll get this over with.

But Jesus goes back instead to Pilate’s first question. “My kingdom is not of this world. If it were, my servants would fight to prevent my arrest by the Jewish leaders. But now my kingdom is from another place.” Pilate doesn’t really listen. He hears the word “kingdom” and his ears perk
up. So you are a king! Pilate wants Jesus to be more clear. But it would have been good for him to listen, because Jesus already told him a lot. *My kingdom is not of this world*, Jesus says, or better translated: *My kingdom is not from this world...My kingdom comes from another place.* In the face of the man who represents the self-proclaimed son of the gods, Jesus says that his kingdom doesn’t come from this world. His kingdom comes from another place. But that doesn’t mean that it’s other-worldly. No, deep in Jesus’ words is the implication, made explicit in other parts of the Gospel, that his kingdom is very much this-worldly. His kingdom comes from another place, but it’s coming. It’s coming from that other place to this place. It’s coming, and there’s nothing Pilate can do about it.

But, of course, Pilate doesn’t quite catch this. *So, you are a king?* he asks Jesus. He just wants a straight answer. He wants to settle this and get back to bed. But by asking this question, he does something kind of remarkable. Jesus responds *You say that I am a king.* And we realize that Pilate has just declared a profound truth, because, of course, Christ is a king. Christ is the King. And then Jesus says *In fact, the reason I was born and came into the world is to testify to the truth. Everyone on the side of truth listens to me.* And this truth is that Jesus Christ is King Yahweh, described in Psalm 93. He is enthroned on high, and his reign is established in eternity. And as the rest of the narrative unfolds, Pilate begins to realize this. He realizes it in a way that nobody else does, because for perhaps the first time in his life, Pilate realizes that he really isn’t in control. Pilate goes out to tell the crowds that he thinks Jesus is innocent, and the crowds demand that he free Barabbas the rebel instead of Jesus. Pilate has Jesus beaten and then tells the crowds again that he thinks Jesus is innocent, and the crowds yell *crucify him!* And as the narrative unfolds, Pilate becomes more and more afraid. Every time he tries to let Jesus go, he is blocked. Jesus won’t stand up for himself, and Pilate sees himself slowly losing control of the situation.
Because you see, the Kingdom of our Lord is not from this world. It is not subject to the powers of this world, and it doesn’t follow the rules of this world. In ancient times, a new kingdom came with power and might and armies and war and murder and fighting. But here comes Jesus, the King of the world, whose kingdom is not from this world. The Prince of Peace, who chooses a crown of thorns rather than a crown of gold and jewels, who is draped in the scarlet robe of his own blood, who is raised up and enthroned on a cross. Here we have a King whose march to the throne begins with his death; a King who chooses the path of submission and obedience, and not the path of power and glory. This upside-down King, as his first act in office, dies. And Pilate can’t help but nail a sign over his beaten, broken, ragged body: Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews.

And we all know the rest of the glorious story. Jesus defeats death, and is raised from the dead. He ascends into heaven to take his rightful place at the right hand of God the Father, where he serves as ruler and judge over all of heaven and earth. And we can point back to Psalm 93, where the seas listen to his voice, and his statutes are mightier than the breakers of the sea, and we can say, “See! Our Lord reigns! He is robed in majesty! He is armed with strength! His throne is secure! Established from all eternity! The seas listen to his voice! His voice is mightier than the roaring sea! Even death cannot stop him!” And in the words of the Nicene Creed we proudly proclaim “His Kingdom will never end!”

And all this is the culmination of the Season of Ordinary Time, when we learn what it means to live as the followers of this great King. When we learn that it is not in power or might that our journey begins, but in death. Through the story of the Gospel we learn that our great God has turned the wisdom of this world upside-down, that to defeat death we must die to ourselves, that to become great we must become servants, that to gain our freedom we must obey. That is what we learn over the Season of Ordinary Time, that
to be followers of Christ means submission to the will of the Father. It means dying to our own passions and desires. It means ending our petitions with “Not my will, but yours be done.” It means learning why Christ commands us to pray “Your Kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.”

The Kingdom of God begins with self-sacrifice. The Kingdom of Christ begins with Christ’s death. But the good news is that death can’t hold our God. In his resurrection he crushes death. In his ascension he takes his rightful place as the ruler of all nations. In his glorification he is clothed with the splendor that is due him. His word of truth will never fade away, and when he returns to judge the living and the dead, we too will become like him. As we share in his sufferings in this life, so will we share in his glory when he returns. And every knee will bow, and every tongue will confess that Jesus Christ is King of kings, and Lord of lords, to the glory of God the Father.

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

Amen.
They called me “100% gringo.” If I had been white enough to blush, my anger and frustration would have instantly been revealed. However, my skin wasn’t white. They didn’t see my anger, frustration and shame. Back in the United States, calling a Latino a gringo was either a bad joke or an insult good enough to start a fist fight. But, I wasn’t in the States; I was in Nicaragua. I swallowed my pride to try and understand why they thought it was okay to refer to me as a gringo. I was born in Brooklyn, New York to a Dominican father and a Puerto Rican mother. I was raised within a tight community of Latinos in West Michigan. My cultural heritage is Latino. My culture in practice is Latino, specifically that of Dominicans and Puerto Ricans. More often than not, I’d rather converse in Spanish or Spanglish, and eat Caribbean foods. I relate to others through a Latino lens. I am Latino. However, during my time in Central America I was treated as an outsider to the Latino culture.

When Christ entered the world, he was rejected by his own people. John 1:10-11 says, “He was in the world, and though the world was made through him, the world did not recognize him. He came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him.”

“He’s own did not receive him.” Those words have never rung so true to me as they did after my experience in Central America. In general, natives of Latino countries misunderstand the dynamics of the life of Latinos in the States and therefore often treat them as cultural outsiders. Latinos raised in the States are going home to their people, only to find themselves unwelcome and misunderstood. These Latinos who, like myself, were raised Stateside also experience similar rejection right where they live in the U.S.

---

1 This is a theological reflection on my time in Nicaragua and Costa Rica, where I served during my cross-cultural internship in the summer of 2012.
We’re always under suspicion. “Do you have a green card?” “Where are you really from?” “What’s with the accent?” “Why do you dress like that?” We’re American, but we are treated as something “other” because we don’t measure up to the cultural standards of the White American. We are forced to conform to a process of acculturation in which we will never be “good enough.” Perhaps even more hurtful is to be treated as “other” by foreign-born Latinos who live right alongside U.S.-raised Latinos, shopping at the same grocery stores and going to the same churches. “If you’re really Latino, why do listen to that White music?” “Why is your Spanish so terrible?” We live in a hyphen, between two worlds, without a real place to call home. Rejection has become the sanctuary where we gather together. In my experience as a Latino American, I have come to identify in part with Christ’s rejection by his own people and with the Christ who had nowhere to rest his head.

When I was young, I spent a significant amount of time in the Dominican Republic in the barrio of my grandmother. She lived in the southern end of Villa Mella where the world of el campesino (country person) meets urban Santo Domingo. In other words, it’s a very poor area where rural culture clashes with urban development. It’s not too bad if you know how to get around. You don’t have to search hard to find some of the best chicharones (pork rinds) in the world there. And you don’t have to search too far to find some definite misperceptions of what life was like for me and my family back in the states. If ever there existed a money tree, the people in the barrio of Villa Mella thought for sure I had one in my backyard in Grand Rapids. My reality, however, was the opposite of their perception. Often, my family survived on the mercy of others. We barely had enough money for my siblings and me to get on the plane to go to Santo Domingo. Our suitcases were packed with someone else’s hand-me-downs that we received from a local church, the one where we had to stand in line outside with all the other poor families while the gringos drove by.
on their way to work. I arrived in Nicaragua ready to deal with the misperceptions of my bank account. However, I was unprepared for people attempting to strip me of my cultural heritage.

Part of my experience growing up in West Michigan was being a part of a Spanish-speaking church plant on the south end of Grand Rapids. There I witnessed several failures in ministry. There was a lack of cross-cultural capacity within my church to minister to different Latino subgroups in the church and to share the gospel with the surrounding community. Other issues included breakdowns in the church’s organizational structure, leadership development, and outreach to youth. Growing up in this culture and environment, I purposed in my heart to acquire the resources and skills needed in my urban community and to learn to exercise them well, in order to share them with those living and serving in the urban environment.

Growing up, I felt the major gap between the immigrant Latino adult ministry and the ministry to the Latino youth raised in the U.S. There was not a youth ministry available to me that ministered to my needs as a Latino-American. I jumped back and forth between the extremes of youth ministry at conservative White churches and a piece-meal Latino youth ministry in a church all-together unaware of how to serve adolescents. In many respects, I was treated as a stranger in both places. No one seemed to understand where I was coming from. Not by choice, I learned to navigate both of these worlds. But always present was the desire for a form of ministry that would quench my desire to be reached in the hyphen in which I was forced to live. I decided this would be my quest, to grow in a way that I could reach back to the young Christian leaders living in that same space.

This summer I spent time doing mission work in Central America (mainly in Nicaragua and a short time in Costa Rica), with the goal of further equipping myself for ministry in the urban U.S. Latino context. There, in Central America,
I heard some things that broke my heart. I heard Latinos in the States referred to as everything from gringos to political traitors. How does a father or mother risking their life and freedom to cross into the States become a political traitor to their country, just for wanting to feed their children? When did the desire for abundant life become political treachery?

I was the first Latino from the U.S. that several people in Nicaragua had ever met. The fact that they didn’t know how to receive me, as in whether to give me plantains or cheeseburgers for lunch, broadened my perspective to the needs in the Latino community. There is not just a gap between immigrant and American-raised/born Latinos in the States. There is, in many respects, a far larger gap between Latinos in the U.S. and those in living in Latino countries.

I blame the Disney Channel. I blame movies and the stereotypes that are translated through them. During one of the few time periods where I had down time, I was watching a movie with one of my host families. In this movie, a character played by an African-American woman was yelling at another character in the movie (who happened to be a Latina but could easily pass for White). Then they asked me, “Are Blacks always angry like that?” In a time where Latinos are generally disempowered in the ability to create intentional international interaction to and from the U.S., the media and ignorance on both sides have fostered this gap for too long.

I don’t entirely blame the media. Sin is also a factor in the conversation. When we take our lives and our culture as the standard by which everyone else should live, we set ourselves up as idols to be worshipped. We make our culture the god to which all others must bow. What I experienced in Nicaragua was an augmented form of something I experienced as a child growing up in West Michigan, where the few Latinos that gathered to worship together were never really together. They were always comparing cultural notes as to which people group had the right idea: the Mexicans, Guatemalans, Dominicans, etc.
White missionaries permeate the country of Nicaragua. At times the indigenous leaders expressed to me their frustration about not being fully able to be on the same economic, social, and educational level with their American co-laborers. When my host father expressed that he felt inadequate as a pastor because he never learned English, it broke my heart. I heard the voice of my own father trying to navigate the tumultuous tides of being a Latino church leader in America. I heard in my host father’s words the voice of my high school friends who felt ostracized by their own immigrant relatives because they never learned to speak and read Spanish up to their relatives’ standards. I wonder how we can learn from one another? Can there be a bridge built between these two groups of people? Why are Latinos from the states not being empowered to go serve as missionaries in Latino countries? Well-versed in the pains of cross-cultural living, they are natural leaders in this area of ministry; yet, they are in need of validation to go and serve the Lord on a global scale.

There is a need for the generation living in the hyphen, in the place between American acculturation and Latino culture, to rise and become the much needed bicultural bridge and minister to both worlds. Despite some of these cultural issues I experienced in Nicaragua, I was not dissuaded from God’s calling on my life to serve among Latinos. If anything, I feel God affirmed me in my calling to the local and global Latino community. And in order to be an effective minister to this community, I have to learn to be comfortable living in the hyphen.

My best friend, who is of Dominican descent, was born in Brooklyn, NY. Actually, we were born in the same neighborhood, just a couple of years apart. However, his family moved back to the Dominican Republic and a large part of his life was lived in the D.R. Now, living in Grand Rapids, when people ask him where he is from, he usually starts by saying, “Well, I’m a very confused individual. I’m American, but...” I hear him say this and I don’t think my
friend is confused at all. He says this to make others feel comfortable with his person, with his cultural identity and with his ministry. He reminds me of Paul, who says in 1 Corinthians 9:22, “To the weak I became weak, to win the weak. I have become all things to all people so that by all possible means I might save some.” This is not just the space where we find ourselves, but the space to which God has called us. We are called to rejection. We are called to be the bridge that gets walked on, rolled over, and seen as another means to get by. We are called to lay down our lives for the gospel in a way that most people will never comprehend, except for those who most need a place to step forward in a way that we are uniquely able to provide.
1. The Text: Genesis 39:1-23

Genesis 39 recounts the story of Joseph in Egypt. Although Joseph was a slave of Potiphar, and even became a prisoner, Genesis 39 reveals that God preserved Joseph. In particular, Potiphar’s wife threatened Joseph with sexual seduction and crafty accusations, so Joseph was placed in a serious situation, moving from slave to prisoner. Nevertheless, via the repeated expression, “God was with Joseph (him)” (Gen. 39:2, 3, 21, 23), Genesis 39 asserts that God still preserved Joseph, even through difficult times.

2. The Main Theme of the Text

The main theme of the text is: despite many serious threats, God preserved Joseph and gave him success in whatever he did, thus preserving the channel of blessing to the nations. The main verses of the text are that “The LORD was with Joseph, and he became a successful man, and he was in the house of his Egyptian master. His master saw that the LORD was with him and that the LORD caused all that he did to succeed in his hands” (Gen. 39:2-3 ESV, cf. Gen. 39:21, 23).

Moreover, Genesis 39 is a miniature version of the whole story of Joseph. In the Joseph story, God uses Joseph to preserve his channel of blessing to all nations in the face of great threats. This chapter records a serious challenge to God’s plan and reveals that God was still working in the midst of the challenge. Even though God’s plan was not yet accomplished completely, based on the blessing of God upon

---

1 Originally submitted to Professor Williams on April 10, 2012 for The Art of Hebrew Narrative.

Potiphar’s house, we can get a sense of his plan to bless all nations.

This chapter has a close relationship with the theme of Genesis. According to Michael Williams, the theme of Genesis is: “God separates out one through whom he would bless all nations.” Chapter 39 demonstrates that Joseph was separated from his own family, and that God’s blessing was poured upon Potiphar’s house through Joseph. Although Joseph was yet not God’s channel for blessing all nations at this point in the story, this chapter foreshadows Joseph’s future role as precisely that channel. Genesis 39 substantiates that God’s plan will be accomplished through preserving Joseph under any threats.

3. The Structure of the Text

A. The Lord was with Joseph in Potiphar’s house (1-6)

B. Seduction attempt and accusation by Potiphar’s wife (7-19)

A’. The Lord was with Joseph in the prison of Pharaoh (20-23)

Genesis 39 has an inclusio form of A-B-A’ which highlights the theme of this chapter. Sidney Greidanus mentions that “the most important clue the narrator gives us to his intended meaning is the double inclusio of ‘the LORD was with Joseph.’” In particular, although this chapter recounts a serious challenge that threatened Joseph, we recognize that no challenge is too serious for God. “Despite

3 Michael Williams, How to Read the Bible through the Jesus Lens: A Guide to Christ-Focused Reading of Scripture (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2012), 13.

4 Sidney Greidanus, Preaching Christ from Genesis (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), 382.
all the setbacks Joseph was about to face, God was on his side.”

4. Literary Characteristics

a) Genesis 39:1 plays an important role in connecting back to the Joseph story, which was temporarily interrupted by the Judah-Tamar narrative (Gen. 38). It serves as a hinge: “by recapitulating the situation at the end of chapter 37 (37:36), this verse returns the reader’s focus to Joseph and smooths the narrative transition between chapters 37 and 39.” In particular, this verse represents exactly the same profile of Potiphar in Genesis 37:36 by using the same expression, “חֲרוֹן פִּרְעָה שֶׁל פֹּטִיפַרְחִיָּהוּ.”

b) For the first time in the Joseph story the Lord shows up in Genesis 39:2. Not only that, but in chapter 39 the name “Lord” is used a total of eight times (Gen. 39:2, 3[x2], 4[x2], 21, 23[x2]). This is evidence of the theocentric emphasis of the narrator in this passage. In other words, this reveals that the Joseph story is not merely a human’s story, but a story about the Lord. Although Joseph seems to be the main character of this story, the “leading character” is the Lord.

c) The divine blessing upon Potiphar’s house (Gen. 39:3-5) is a sample of the future blessing for all nations. The reason for the blessing is simply because the Lord was with

---


6 Although Genesis 38 seems not to be related to the Joseph story, the Judah-Tamar narrative has a pivotal role within the Joseph story. See Kyungji Ha, “The Judah Story: A Preview of Resolution in the Joseph Narrative,” *Stromata* 52 (2011): 84–100.


8 Also the name “אלְהָיוֹם” was used once in verse 9.

Joseph. Therefore, as Potiphar’s house experienced God’s blessing by entrusting all Potiphar’s assets to Joseph, we can anticipate that if Pharaoh puts Joseph in charge of Egypt, God will also bless Egypt and the neighboring nations through him.\(^\text{10}\) Wenham also suggests that “in Joseph’s experience here we begin to see how all the families of the earth are to find blessing (cf. 12:3) in Abraham’s descendants.”\(^\text{11}\)

d) The narrator shows the personal features of the characters by contrasting the “naked” demand of Potiphar’s wife (Gen. 39:7, 12) and the rational rejection by Joseph (Gen. 39:8-9).\(^\text{12}\) “Joseph’s single speech characterizes him as an upright young man, loyal to his master, and concerned to please God. Potiphar’s wife’s speeches, by contrast, characterize her as domineering (the command: ‘Lie with me!’), adulterous, devious, and a liar.”\(^\text{13}\)

e) Unlike the simple and naked order to Joseph, the elaborate and ambivalent words of her accusation against Joseph before her husband and servants demonstrate how

---


\(^{12}\) Wenham similarly mentions that “her raw lust and his sense of propriety and loyalty are admirably captured by the dialogue. Her peremptory ‘lie with me’ is countered by a long speech by Joseph, showing his own sense of moral shock at the suggestion” (*Genesis 16-50*, 375). Also, Robert Alter adds that “against her two words, the scandalized (and perhaps nervous) Joseph will issue a breathless response that runs to thirty five words in the Hebrew. It is a remarkable deployment of the technique of contrastive dialogue repeatedly used by the biblical writers to define the differences between characters in verbal confrontation” in *Genesis: Translation and Commentary* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1996), 225.

\(^{13}\) Greidanus, *Preaching Christ from Genesis*, 381.
fiendish and lethal she was. Especially, the subtle changes in words—from “in her hand” (v. 12) to “beside me” (vv. 15, 18), from “fellow” (or “man” v. 14) to “slave” (v. 17), from “laugh at us” (v. 14) to “laugh at me” (v. 17)—and the redeployment of the order of phrases in Hebrew (vv. 14, 17) substantiate her deliberate subterfuge. In other words, Potiphar’s wife was a serious threat to Joseph.

f) The last three verses of Genesis 39 conclude this episode by repeating both thematic key words (all, hand, house, blessing, succeed), and the main phrase: “the LORD was with Joseph (him).” Although Joseph was degraded from a slave to a prisoner, “the formula of the Lord’s being with Joseph” returns the focus to the primary theme.

5. Relationship between Genesis 39 and God’s Redemptive Work in Christ

Genesis 39 presents a story of God’s preservation in the face of a serious threat. This theme has many parallels in the life of Christ, where there are many challenges to God’s redemptive work in Christ. These examples include King Herod’s attempt to kill the baby Jesus (Matt. 2), the temptation in the desert (Matt. 4), the hostility of Jewish religious leaders, and Judah’s betrayal in the Garden of Gethsemane (Matt. 26). In spite of these threats, God preserved and protected Jesus and fulfilled His redemptive work through the death on the cross and the resurrection. Jesus’ death on the cross also initially seems to be a serious threat to God’s redemptive work. However, it is revealed that the cross was the way to achieve God’s goal, and Jesus’ path to the cross is guided by God’s preserving hand.

Greidanus describes the close relation between Joseph in Genesis 39 and Jesus as follows:


15 Alter, Genesis, 224.

16 Alter, The Art of Biblical Narrative, 111.
In this particular episode, we can also detect specific parallels between Joseph and Jesus: As God was with Joseph, so God was with Jesus (Luke 2:40; John 1:32); as Joseph was a blessing to one family, so Jesus was a blessing to all the families of the earth; as Joseph was tempted by Potiphar's wife to take a shortcut to power, so Jesus was tempted by Satan to take a shortcut to power (Matt 4:9); as Joseph was silent when falsely accused, so Jesus was silent when falsely accused (Matt 26:63), and as the innocent Joseph was punished with prison, so the innocent Jesus was punished with death.\(^\text{17}\)

Genesis 39 is a powerful example of the many threats to God's redemptive work. Nevertheless, we can recognize that God’s plan is not frustrated or threatened in any circumstances. As God was with Joseph, God was also with Jesus, preserving his channel of blessing to the nations.

6. Relationship between Genesis 39 and the New Testament\(^\text{18}\)

Likewise, there are many instances of God’s preservation despite serious threats throughout the New Testament. Most notably, Saul’s persecution threatened the Jerusalem church in Acts 8:1-3.\(^\text{19}\) Despite the fact that Saul ravaged the church and committed members of the church to prison, God preserved the church. Then God scattered the church, which had been assembled mainly in Jerusalem,  

\(^{17}\) Greidanus, *Preaching Christ from Genesis*, 385. 

\(^{18}\) God’s plan to bless all nations through his channel remains unchanged in the NT. However, the blessing in NT is not merely material abundance or social success, but to became God’s children through Gospel. Namely, as written in John 3:16, the blessing is to possess eternal life in Jesus Christ. In order to enjoy this blessing for all nations, God separated his church out of the world. Not only that, God also commanded the church to evangelize all nations (Acts 2:8).  

\(^{19}\) “Before he was taken back to heaven the Lord Jesus Christ told his disciples that after he was gone his enemies would persecute and kill them, thinking they were doing God a service” (Matt. 24:9). See James Montgomery Boice, *Acts: An Expositional Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1997), 130.
throughout the world to evangelize all nations. Moreover, certain episodes in which the apostles were released from jail by the help of God (Acts 5, 12, 16) substantiate the theme of Genesis 39: despite serious threats, God preserves his channel to bless all nations.

In the New Testament, the apostle Paul and the apostle John are living witnesses who elucidate this theme. Paul testified to this truth in his second letter to the Corinthians, writing:

I have worked much harder, been in prison more frequently, been flogged more severely, and been exposed to death again and again. Five times I received from the Jews the forty lashes minus one. Three times I was beaten with rods, once I was stoned, three times I was shipwrecked, I spent a night and a day in the open sea, I have been constantly on the move. I have been in danger from rivers, in danger from bandits, in danger from my own countrymen, in danger from Gentiles; in danger in the city, in danger in the country, in danger at sea; and in danger from false brothers. I have laboured and toiled and have often gone without sleep; I have known hunger and thirst and have often gone without food; I have been cold and naked (2 Cor. 11:23b-27 NIV).

Through Paul’s testimony, we can recognize that there were a large number of severe difficulties that threatened Paul’s life and work. Nonetheless, God preserved Paul to bless the Gentiles through the Gospel. Because of this, Paul could testify, “I can do all things through him who strengthens me” (Phil. 4:13 ESV).

Think of the apostle John on Patmos. John introduced the book of Revelation with: “I, John, your brother and the one who shares with you in the persecution, kingdom, and endurance that are ours in Jesus” (Rev. 1:9). Although John was exiled to the island by the persecution of the Roman
authorities, God preserved him. God even gave him the revelation of Christ Jesus for all nations of the current generation and the subsequent generations.

To sum up, as God had been with Joseph to preserve His channel of blessing to all nations, and also as Jesus promised “I am with you always, to the end of the age” (Matt. 28:20), God was with the New Testament church and the apostles in order to preserve his channel for evangelizing all nations. But God’s work does not stop here.

7. Relationship between Genesis 39 and Contemporary Believers

We have confirmed that despite severe threats, God preserves his channel of blessing for all nations through examples like Joseph, Jesus Christ, the apostles and the early church. The remarkable thing is that God is still at work in the same way within the lives of believers who are living today. This is because God’s plan to bless all nations is still ongoing, and because God still uses contemporary believers as his channel of blessing.

Christian neophytes usually think that everything will be fine. Since they have become children of God Almighty, their expectation that there will be no obstacles or difficulty in their future life is not strange. However, when we scrutinize the daily lives of believers, we realize that they are not always prosperous. Specifically, whenever we hear the news of believers under any persecution, such as believers in North Korea, Afghanistan, etc., we sometimes doubt that

---

20 “John’s presence on Patmos has been explained in several ways: (1) He had been exiled to Patmos by the Roman authorities. (2) He traveled to Patmos for the purpose of proclaiming the gospel. (3) He went to Patmos in order to receive a revelation. The first explanation, held by many church fathers (Clement Alex. Quis Dives 42; Origen Hom. in Mt.M 7.51; 16.6; Eusebius Hist. Eccl. 3.18; Jerome Devirillustr; 10), appears most probable, even though it requires certain qualifications.” Davie E. Aune, Revelation 1-5, WBC 52A (Dallas, Tex.: Word, 1997), 81.
God is still alive.\textsuperscript{21} Despite our doubts, God is still at work in their lives.

When I was a student at Chongshin Theological Seminary, I heard a lecture from a missionary named Isaac, who had been working among the people of North Korea.\textsuperscript{22} He described how he had started the missionary work for them, and what kind of things he had experienced. The most surprising thing I remember was an episode after he was severely tortured. During the torture, he was pushed to the brink of death. In spite of that severe torture, he did not abandon his faith but proclaimed “only Jesus Christ!” Fortunately, it worked out for him to be released.

After that, he began to question, “Why didn’t God keep me in safety?” “Why did I go through that painful experience?” A few years later, he recognized the answer to his questions. The answer was the two men who had tortured him. He met them in his missionary work. Although he first met them as those who tortured him, when he met them again, they had been transformed into evangelists for the people of North Korea just as he had been. When he heard their story of conversion, he had no choice but to be surprised. Thanks to his steadfast faith during the time he was tortured and his small Bible that was confiscated by them, they were changed. When they first saw him, they could not understand a single thing about him. They had been curious about how this missionary could bear witness to his faith Jesus Christ in the face of death, and so they searched for reasons in that small Bible. Through this process, they became true Christians and even became leaders of the underground church in North Korea. Because of them, the missionary recognized why he experienced that

\begin{small}
\textsuperscript{21} For reference, see “World Watch List Countries” on the website of Open Doors USA. \<http://www.worldwatchlist.us/world-watch-list-countries>\\
\textsuperscript{22} Because of security concerns, he used a pseudonym. I do not know his real name.
\end{small}
extreme torture. Through them, he experienced God’s profound providence once more.

God preserved Isaac through his torture in order to propagate the good news to the people of North Korea. By means of this missionary, two torturers enjoyed God’s blessing. Before long, through them, as God’s channel of blessing, the people of North Korea will begin to enjoy God’s blessing. This remarkable case is not a special experience only seen in missionary work. Even within the daily lives of contemporary believers, this preservation of God occurs.

To conclude, the theme that despite many threats God preserves his channel of blessing for all nations is not only apparent in the Old Testament and the New Testament but is still at work in the lives of contemporary believers. In order to bless all nations by way of evangelizing with the Gospel, God preserves us as his channel of blessing. Although believers sometimes suffer martyrdom because of transmitting the Gospel, God still preserves his own channel in order to bless all nations. Moreover, as God’s channel, we should address any threat as follows: “However, I consider my life worth nothing to me, if only I may finish the race and complete the task the Lord Jesus has given me—the task of testifying to the gospel of God’s grace” (Acts 20:24 NIV).
Everyone wants to be an individual. The question, of course, is how can we be most “ourselves”? How can I be most “me”? How can I be set free from the constraints of family, culture, and responsibilities and really be “One of a Kind”? There is a Dr. Pepper commercial out there that goes something like this: Sad man in a subway station, blending in with his business suit, sips a Dr. Pepper. Sad man is refreshed and happy. He takes off his suit to reveal a red Dr. Pepper shirt that reads, “I’m a One of a Kind.” As he walks, Dr. Pepper drinks and tees magically appear, transforming everyone around him until, at the last moment in the commercial, only one young woman remains in her business wear. The first man offers her a Dr. Pepper, and smiling, she takes off her coat to reveal a t-shirt underneath that reads, “I’m a Pepper.”

The way our culture responds to our desire for individuality is by offering us conformity—but conformity of a different kind than we currently posses. The way our culture responds to our desire for freedom is by offering us glimpses of a carefree life—a life free from the worries, cares, and bills of our world. And whether it’s Dr. Pepper making the commercial or any other advertiser (or even our coworkers or friends), a lifestyle of freedom “sells” almost any product because at some level we all struggle with this disparity between how our lives are and how we want them to be.

If I listen to Dr. Pepper, I’m most “free” when I’m participating in their brand. It might seem a little counter-intuitive, but you could say that according to Dr. Pepper, “I’m most free” when I’m buying Dr. Pepper, drinking Dr. Pepper, wearing Dr. Pepper apparel. Essentially, I’m most

---

free when I’m enslaved to Dr. Pepper. And that, of course, is the problem with our world. Although we have this sense that there is something we want to free ourselves from, we quickly find that the freedom we are offered evaporates and we are left merely with the dregs of another kind of slavery.

Perhaps I’m really making too big of a deal out of a can of pop. However, it’s not just one can of pop and it’s not just the fountain drink industry. Our blind consumerism and materialism—our slavery to false sources of fulfillment and meaning—costs Americans over one trillion dollars every year. And that is only the financial toll. We are often no more than slaves to our materialist desires—our current state between “Black Friday” and Christmas should serve as the perfect example of this destructive and corruptive impulse at work. And though Reformed Christians have a rich theological heritage of and view toward transforming (or creating) culture (cf. H. Richard Niebuhr, Andy Crouch, et. al.), we have also been doing the shopping, the buying, and the soda drinking. All too often, we have been the ones shaped and transformed by culture.

So what, if not the way of our world, is true and unadulterated freedom? Dietrich Bonhoeffer describes freedom as having two components—both freedom from slavery and freedom for another. In *Creation and Fall*, Bonhoeffer argues,

> Freedom is not a quality that can be discovered. It is not a possession, a presence, or an object. Nor is it a pattern for existence. Rather, it is relationship; otherwise, it is nothing. … Being free means ‘being free for the other,’

---

2 “America's buying habits have been well documented. In 2009, the latest year for which comprehensive data is available from the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, Americans spent $1.13 trillion on discretionary purchases.” <http://www.investopedia.com/financial-edge/0512/the-spending-habits-of-americans.aspx#ixzz2CtwvWG8q>
because the other has bound me to himself or herself. Only in relationship with the other am I free.\textsuperscript{3}

While our culture quickly understands freedom \textit{from}, we are often halted and confused by Bonhoeffer’s description of freedom \textit{for}. The good news, however, is that we are not alone. Ancient Israel had the same struggle; perhaps we can learn from them.

When we address the book of Exodus as a whole, Israel is never free in the way we often imagine freedom—she is never free from relationship just to “do her own thing.” Israel is always led by some master: the choice she constantly must make is not whether to be free from all allegiances, but rather whom she will serve. At the beginning of Exodus, Israel is forced into the building programs of Pharaoh. Later, she is freed \textit{from} slavery in Egypt \textit{for} service to God. Likewise, when the Israelites returned \textit{from} exile in Babylon, they read Exodus (Neh. 8:1-10:39) because, like their ancestors who were featured in the book, they had to learn how properly to live in the freedom that God had given them; they had to learn what their freedom \textit{was for}.

I am trying here to illustrate the pedagogical function of the book of Exodus. Suffice it to say, for the purposes of time and space, that I think many Christians find ourselves in a sort of Exodus-like place: we’ve been introduced to this God whom we are supposed to worship to the exclusion of all others, but the question remains, “Now that we have been saved \textit{from} all of those things, what are we saved \textit{for}? How do we live lives of worship to God?” My anecdotal experience has told me that many young people flounder in their faith—either inside the church or outside of it—because they have not found satisfactory lived-out answers to this question. I might add here that there is a mountain of researched and published evidence to back up this argument,

but I’m not going to deal with that research in this essay. Instead, I will argue that just as the book of Exodus was compiled as a pedagogical tool for the Israelites on how to live free from slavery to competing mythologies and free for relationship with the other (God, but other nations as well), so too it can serve pedagogically for us today: We need to learn to live free from slavery to consumerism (among other false gods) and free for relationship with the other (God and our neighbor).

Just as the theological struggles of today—our questions of how to serve the Lord—come in the context of our struggle with competing cultural ideals, so too the Israelites struggled with how to relate to the cultures around them. To the Israelites returning from the Babylonian exile, the book of Exodus did not simply tell quaint stories from Israel’s cultural history, it taught a confused people about their identity, it told former slaves how to cope with their newfound freedom, and it showed dirty people how to live in the pristine presence of God. Important here are not primarily the characters and events of Exodus, but the message of the book as a whole—the final form of which formed and shaped post-exilic Israel.

Through a mirror reading of the book of Exodus, we can see that the Israelites obviously wrestled with the influences

---

of other cultural norms and values around them.⁵ One of the ways we can know this is by looking at the shape and content of the book of Exodus, especially compared to the shape and content of some other religious books of the day. Dr. Arie Leder offers an interpretation that breaks Exodus into four main sections: The Occasion for Conflict (1:1-7:7), The Battle (7:8-14:31), God’s Kingship Declared (15:1-24:11), and the House of God built (24:12-40:38).⁶ This is the interpretive model that I would like to adopt because it highlights the structure of the book of Exodus as a polemic, which proclaims God as the one true God over against other gods, and establishes proper ways of serving him in the face of improper ways, setting parameters for God’s relationship with his people.

Two Ancient Near Eastern myths parallel the Exodus narrative—the Babylonian Enuma elish and the Canaanite Baal Cycle. The Baal Cycle is made up of four stories: In the first story, Yamm (“Sea”), who represents the chaotic ocean forces, demands tribute from Baal, who refuses to pay and instead battles and defeats Yamm to win the kingship under the higher god, El. This victory gives him the desire for a palace, which he is finally given by El in the second account. From his new palace, Baal issues a bold challenge to his enemies, especially to the ravenous god Mot (“Death”), who rules the Underworld. This precipitates yet another conflict, forming the third story, which gives Yamm time to recover.

⁵ It has long been recognized that Exodus 15:1-18 employs the language, style, and literary structure of the creation myths of the ancient Near East. What is not agreed upon, however, is the extent to which this pattern has influenced the theology of this chapter. Cf. Terence E. Fretheim, "The reclamation of creation: redemption and law in Exodus," Interpretation 45, no. 4 (October 1, 1991): 357.

What you get, essentially, is a series of endless struggles between the gods who represent the forces of life and death as they affect humanity.\(^7\)

*Enuma elish*, by contrast, presents a different account. According to this Babylonian myth, in the time before the earth’s creation there was a long and terrible winter covering a mass of unformed, primordial waters. The powers of the deep were in control, until Marduk—the god of the sun—rose out of the confusion and fought with Ti’ämät—the incarnation of the chaotic primordial waters. Marduk conquered Ti’ämät and split her carcass in half, using one half to create the waters below and the other to create the expanse above.\(^8\) From the blood and entrails that remained of the gods slain in the battle, Marduk shaped the human race to be his slaves. Following his victory over Ti’ämät, the lesser gods built a palace for Marduk and he was made ruler over all. At the banquet to celebrate his victory, Marduk is given 50 honorific names, signifying his power.

Key to seeing the importance of the relationship between these narratives is that while their structures are similar, the content and theology of Exodus is not only different, but *opposite from and diametrically opposed* to the theology of the other two stories. At the core of this opposition is the issue of freedom. The Babylonians who adhered to the *Enuma elish* myth understood humanity as inevitably enslaved to selfish and warring demigods. Likewise, the Baal-worshipers of Canaan could offer a theological explanation for the seasonal cycle and begin to explain the tensions between conflicting forces acting on and against human existence. Neither of these ancient Near-Eastern myths, however, offers the freedom of Exodus because only

---


Exodus offers freedom from slavery to fear and slavery to our base desires. And only Exodus offers freedom for relationship with the other—relationship with God.

Only this relationship, found in the Exodus narrative, realizes the potential of Bonhoeffer’s freedom. Because the Israelites became servants of the Most High God and because they turned away from other gods, they were offered a relationship with the divine that is impossible through any other means and that remains the only explanation of the world that can make sense of all the nuances of human existence. Ralph Klein puts it this way:

Yahweh is the one who brought Israel out of the land of Egypt, freeing the ancestors from unspeakable oppression (chaps. 1-15), but the ultimate purpose of this exodus is that Yahweh might dwell among his people. Life in the presence of God is clearly considered to be an ideal existence.9

This, then, is ultimate freedom: relationship with God, being in the presence of God. Arie Leder describes the theme of Exodus this way: “By mighty signs of power the Lord rescues Israel from Pharaoh and brings her to his presence at Sinai in order to dwell in her midst by means of the tabernacle.”10 This movement in Exodus culminates with a blessing, which is described as a direct result of Israel’s faithfulness to Yahweh: “The Israelites had done all the work just as the Lord had commanded Moses. Moses inspected the work and saw that they had done it just as the Lord had commanded. So Moses blessed them” (Ex. 39:42-43, NIV). This is Exodus’ depiction of true freedom: the blessing of the presence of the Lord and relationship with the divine as the result of faithful works of service and commitment to God alone.

---


10 Leder, Arie C. "Reading Exodus to Learn and Learning to Read Exodus." Calvin Theological Journal 34, no. 1 (April 1, 1999): 35.
Of course, the key for us today is that Exodus (and all of scripture) still offers that explanation and that relationship. Because of Christ, the demands of the Old Testament law do not weigh heavily upon our shoulders. And yet we are not free from the law, but we are to live lives of thanks-filled service, keeping the law because we recognize that it defines the parameters of right relationship with God.\textsuperscript{11} Exodus in particular, because it is structured in order to combat competing cultural ideologies, offers a paradigm today for how to develop a youth ministry that is able to engage the cultural challenges of young people today.

If we were to place ourselves in one part of the story of Exodus, I would position most Christian young people in Exodus 6. In this passage, the Lord says to Moses:

Therefore, say to the Israelites: “I am the Lord, and I will bring you out from under the yoke of the Egyptians. I will free you from being slaves to them, and I will redeem you with an outstretched arm and with mighty acts of judgment. I will take you as my own people, and I will be your God. Then you will know that I am the Lord your God, who brought you out from under the yoke of the Egyptians. And I will bring you to the land I swore with uplifted hand to give to Abraham, to Isaac and to Jacob. I will give it to you as a possession. I am the Lord.” Moses reported this to the Israelites, but they did not listen to him because of their discouragement and cruel bondage. [emphasis mine]

Most youth workers I talk to, if they are frustrated, are frustrated because they cannot seem to get through to their young people in any way that affects their lives. Exodus reminds us that we too need to be freed from our slavery to worries, debts, consumerism and Dr. Pepper. We need to live in relationship with God. We need to end up in the blessing of Exodus 39: “The Israelites had done all the work just as the Lord had commanded Moses. Moses inspected the work and saw that they had done it just as the Lord had

\textsuperscript{11} Cf. Mt. 5:17, Rom. 6:1, 1 Pe. 2:12ff., etc.
commanded. *So Moses blessed them*” (emphasis mine). But the question remains how to move from Exodus 6 to Exodus 39. The answer that the book of Exodus gives? Walk through the desert.

Because so many of us are ruthlessly pragmatic—with our possessions and with our faith—the question remains: how do we move from believing this story to believing that story? How do we move from the world of Baal to the Word of God? How do we move from believing corporate commercials to living transformed lives *coram Deo*? And, of course, it’s not enough simply to ask young people what they believe—we need to see change in their lives. And they need to see it in ours. We should have been able to see that divine change in the lives of the Israelites, though it’s questionable whether Israel was ever truly transformed. My response to these questions is to address them head on, framing youth ministry in the context of freedom (from and for): Freedom *from* means training in holiness (being set apart). Freedom *for* means right relationship with the other—both God and neighbor.

For forty days in the summer of 2011, I led a group of 30 middle school kids in daily encounters with the book of Exodus. These kids had exposure to the Bible all of their lives, but like the Israelites when Moses came to them about God for the first time, “they did not listen to him because of their discouragement and cruel bondage” (Ex. 6:9). These young people—*my* young people—were hurting in many different ways; in that way they are like us all. We are all, at first, resistant to the good news and to the gospel. But the good news is stronger than our opposition—God finds us in our slavery and weakness and turns us to himself.

Because of the polemical framework I outlined above, I began talking to these young people about slavery (Ex. 1:1ff) as we began to act out the stories of Exodus together on a basement stage. Although some of these young people were not yet teenagers, they already knew and could name oppressive and enslaving forces in their lives (even if not in
those terms)—those things that have authority over them and that hold them captive. Different than complaining, we used the story of Exodus to identify and address those things that hold us in bondage and keep us from the freedom of God. Second, we talked about God confronting Pharaoh through Moses and the plagues (6:13-12:30)—how God deals separately with those who love him and with those who, like Pharaoh, say, “Who is the LORD, that I should obey him?” (Ex. 5:2). We discussed how God loves his people and frees them from oppression for service to him. We talked about the miraculous provision of God in parting the Red Sea (13:17-14:30), in vanquishing Israel’s enemies, and in providing bread from heaven (16:1-36). We talked about the monotony of every day life in the desert—about Israel being formed and shaped by daily rituals of wandering in a wasteland and depending on God—even as we recognized that we ourselves were being formed and shaped by our daily participation in God’s ongoing story. We talked about the Ten Commandments, not as limiting, but as freeing. These young people knew where breaking the law led—they were victims of their parents’ sin as well as their own. In doing so, we began to understand that “the law, rather than being a means of salvation, was a means of helping Israel to become a ‘holy people’ set apart to God (Exod 19:6), for it defines holy behavior. The laws prohibit things that are destructive to Israel's relationship with God [and] promotes things that cultivate a proper relationship with God.”

Even the law is all about relationship.

We also talked about falling short, having idols (Ex. 32), and about forgiveness and second chances (Ex. 34). Most importantly, however, we talked about “tabernacling”—the long road toward God’s increased presence with us—and how God’s presence remains with us. God’s presence frees

---

us for lives of true joy because only through God’s power can we be truly free—free to love and serve others. We realized that we cannot serve ourselves or do relationships on our own, not only by looking at the Israelites, but also in looking at the broken world around us.

Throughout the summer, we took time every day to write the major events of the story of Exodus on a long roll of paper. During our last meeting together, I offered all the young people an opportunity to add their names to the long list of stories of God’s work. This was not only a concrete way for them to “sign up” for the gospel, but it was also a symbolic gesture, one that recognized how we all need a story to belong to. We all need a place where we find our allegiance and where we look to for hope, for fulfillment, for life, and for freedom. For my young people, this “sign up” was an opportunity to buy into the only narrative that would not let them down. This was an opportunity to come out of unfulfilled lives and embrace the ongoing narrative of redemptive history.

The problem, of course, is that the false stories and promises of our culture’s consumerism also encourage young people to “sign on” to their agenda, even though most companies are not as obvious as Dr. Pepper in suggesting that young people embrace their brand for all to see! My experiences, however, while not necessarily normative do conclude that when we read Exodus as a polemic for freedom, we see these corporate influences addressed and beginning to be conquered. Scripture allows us to see that there can be “another way”—a way out of the endless slavery of our world today. Praise God for the ongoing testimony of his word, because at this point, no one other than God can get us out of this kind of mess that we’ve gotten ourselves into, just trying to “be me” and rejecting the freedom of relationships.
**Appendix**

*Enume elish*

1. The occasion for the conflict:
   b. Marduk will fight for supreme authority III:65-66

3. The kingship:
   a. Kingship is bestowed IV:14

2. The battle:
   a. The battle IV:33-120
      i. Marduk defeats Tiamat with a war-bow IV:101
      ii. Salvation of the gods IV:123-46
   b. The Creation of man VI:1-44

4. The palace:
   a. Building of the temple Esharra VI:45-77
      i. Bricks made for one year VI:60
      ii. Erected at beginning of second year VI:61-62
      iii. Marduk sits down in majesty VI:65
   b. Marduk’s rule VI:78-81
   c. Praise of kingship and proclamation of the fifty names VI:104ff.

*Baal and Yamm*

1. The occasion for the conflict:
   a. Yamm’s messengers demand Baal’s tribute CTA 2, i:11, 22, 32-38
   b. Ashkarte urges Baal to seize the eternal kingship CTA 2, i:40ff.

2. The battle:
   a. Baal battles Yamm CTA 2, i:11-17
   b. Baal defeats Yamm with a club CTA 2, i:18-31

3. The kingship:
   a. Baal’s kingship is proclaimed CTA 2, i:34
   b. The victory banquet CTA 3 A
   c. Complaints: no house for Baal CTA 3 C, E:46
   d. Baal travels to Mt Zaphon CTA 4, iv:19

4. The palace:
   a. A dwelling for Baal requested CTA 4, iv:50
   b. Let a house be built CTA 4, iv:61
      i. Mountains will bring gold and silver CTA 4, iv:80
      ii. Lapis lazuli CTA 4, iv:81
   c. Anat brings news of permission to Mt Zaphon CTA 4, iv:88
   d. House of Baal will be the size of Mt Zaphon CTA 4, iv:119-20
   e. Built by Kothar and Hasis
      i. To Lebanon for cedar CTA 4, vi:19-21
      ii. Fire turns silver and gold into bricks on the seventh day CTA 4, vi:31-34
   f. A victory banquet CTA 4, vi:39-55
   g. Baal’s rule CTA 4, vii:9-12
   h. A window is built in Baal’s palace CTA 4, viii:13-28
   i. Palace is the place from which Baal speaks CTA 4, vii:29-55

*Exodus*

1. The occasion for conflict:
   a. Pharaoh’s oppression Ex. 1:2-25
   b. The Lord’s messengers demand Pharaoh’s submission Ex. 3:1-7:7

2. The battle:
   a. The conflict Ex. 7:8-11:10
   b. The exodus Ex. 12:1-13:16
   c. Pharaoh’s defeat Ex. 13:17-14:31

3. The kingship:
   a. The Lord’s victory and proclamation of kingship Ex. 15:1-21
   b. The Lord takes Israel to Mt Sinai Ex. 15:22-19:2
   c. The Lord makes Israel his people Ex. 19:3-24:11

4. The Lord’s palace:
   a. The Lord will dwell among Israel Ex. 24:12-18
   b. Building instructions Ex. 25
   c. Israel’s rebellion Ex. 32
   d. Tabernacle and furniture crafted Ex. 35-39:31
   e. Moses inspects the work and blesses the people Ex. 39:42,43
   f. Moses instructed to set up mshkn on first day of second year Ex. 40:1, 2
   g. Mshkn sets up the tabernacle in seven acts Ex. 40:17-33
   h. The Lord dwells in the mshkn Ex. 40:34-38

The Lives of the Saints:  
An Education in the Good Life¹  
Mark VanderWerf

New York Times columnist David Brooks tapped into a long Judeo-Christian view of education when he recently wrote: “people learn from people they love, education is fundamentally about the relationship between a teacher and student.”² In this simple conclusion to a column about an experimental school in Brooklyn, Brooks spoke with more pedagogical insight and more historic wisdom than many educational experts. He rightly understood that education is about relationships and the formation of loves.

In an earlier generation, Jewish scholar Abraham Joshua Heschel commented that in religious education, students do not need more esoteric doctrines and propositions about what is true; rather, they need to see human examples of the religious life. He writes, “What we need more than anything else is not textbooks but textpeople. It is the personality of the teacher which is the text that the pupils read; the text that they will never forget.”³ Students need to see faith authentically embodied in real human lives.

Similarly, James K.A. Smith has recently chastised much of Christian education for buying into the Enlightenment myth that education is fundamentally about the transmission of ideas from the teacher’s brain to the empty receptacles of the students’ brains. Instead, he argues that education should first and foremost be about the formation of one’s loves. In Desiring the Kingdom, Smith argues that people are being educated all the time. Advertisements and movies, images on

¹ Originally submitted to Professor Feenstra in May 2012 for an Independent Study
billboards and music on iPods are all tugging at the heart and saying, “This is the good life. Love me. Be conformed into my image.”

Sadly, in Smith’s analysis, Christian educators have been at a loss to compete with this “secular education” that people, especially teenagers, have been receiving. The world in which teenagers live is a world saturated with images and gut-impulses aimed at grabbing the heart and molding its desires. Foolishly, Christian education has tried to counteract that education by focusing upon informing students’ minds by teaching more Christian content. Yet, as Smith points out, more Christian ideas can’t compete with the visceral education that our youth are receiving in every other part of their lives. He describes the “education” that teenagers receive from the ubiquitous culture as a religious formation of the heart to desire the “good life.” He describes that education with the religious imagery of saints and icons:

Unlike the flattened depictions of saints one might find in stained-glass windows, here is an array of three-dimensional icons adorned in garb that—as with all iconography—inspires us to be imitators of these exemplars. These statutes and icons embody for us concrete images of “the good life.” Here is a religious proclamation that does not traffic in abstracted ideals or rules or doctrines, but rather offers to the imagination pictures and statues and moving images. While other religions are promising salvation through the thin, dry media of books and messages, this new global religion is offering embodied pictures of the redeemed that invite us to imagine ourselves in their shoes—to imagine ourselves otherwise, and thus to willingly submit to the disciplines that produce the saints evoked in the icons.4

Smith observes that culture is constantly peddling images of the ‘good life.’ In contrast, he persuasively argues that the Christian church and Christian education has not done well in competing with this secular education—this secular education:

imaging of the good life. The church has contented itself with informing the head while the world is forming the heart. In response, Smith suggests that education be re-imagined. He wonders:

What if education was primarily concerned with shaping our hopes and passions—our visions of ‘the good life’—and not merely about the dissemination of data and information as inputs to our thinking? What if the primary work of education was the transforming of our imagination rather than the saturation of our intellect? …

What if education wasn’t first and foremost about what we know, but about what we love?5

Assuming that Brooks, Heschel, and Smith are right in asserting that education is fundamentally about the formation of our loves and is most effective when done in relationship to human examples, then the task and method of Christian theological education ought to reflect their perspectives. Christian theological education ought to be aimed at the formation of human loves. In light of this, I am suggesting that an evaluation of the historic use of the “lives of the saints” and a modern appropriation of these “lives” in Christian theological education can be a useful pedagogical tool for educating the heart and helping students be drawn into the good life of Christian discipleship.

**What is Christian theological education?**

At the outset, it is important to understand what is meant by the phrase ‘Christian theological education.’ In re-envisioning Christian theological education, I am not seeking to set aside already established models for doing theology (i.e. biblical, historical, or systematic). Rather, I want to bring to the table the classically-shaped purpose of theology that is discussed by Ellen Charry in *By the Renewing of Your Mind* in which she explores the theological discipline as it developed from the early church, through the medieval era, and into the Reformation. She states that

---

5 Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom*, 18.
across the centuries, such notable theologians as Athanasius, Augustine, Aquinas, and Calvin were agreed that the “central theological task is to assist people to come to God” and to know and love him.\(^6\) This is the task of Christian theological education: to bring people into encounters with the living God. Charry elaborates, however, and states that knowing God naturally leads to human excellence and human flourishing because it results in the formation of our lives according to the image of God. Thus, according to Charry, theological inquiry had a two-fold task: to know God and to be conformed into his image.\(^7\)

Charry’s understanding of theology is not a recent concept anachronistically imposed upon theological education; rather, it has long been the church’s intent. Robert Lois Wilken, an early church historian, traces many of the theological themes of the early church in his work *The Spirit of Early Christian Thought: Seeking the Face of God.* Wilken concludes his study of the major theologians of the early church by stating that “thinking about the things of God, like grammar, was not an end in itself; its aim was the love of God and holiness of life.”\(^8\) From Wilken’s assessment, it is clear that the twin tasks of theological education were clearly present in the early church.

According to medievalist Jean Leclercq, these twin goals of theological education were carried into the medieval era as well. Commenting on the theological writings of Bernard of Clairvaux, Leclercq states that medieval theological education “assumes on the part of the teacher, and on the part of his audience, a special way of life, a rigorous

---


\(^7\) Charry, *By the Renewing of Your Minds*, 18.

asceticism, or as they say today a ‘commitment.’ Rather than speculative insights, it gives them a certain appreciation, of savoring and clinging to the truth and, what is everything, to the love of God.”

Leclercq’s observations correct the false assumption that medieval theology was recklessly scholastic and disinterested in producing holy living. Medieval theologians knew that the knowledge of God results in conformity to God.

Furthermore, John Calvin echoed this long tradition of understanding the two-fold purpose of theology. He states at the outset of his Institutes that as one raises his mind to consider God and his nature, he encounters “the straightedge to which we must be shaped.”

Like his theological predecessors, Calvin thought that the study of God and his nature should never be done for mere speculation, but ought to be the grounds and the end to which our human lives are to be formed.

In the long Christian tradition, theological study has been understood to be formative, not just informative. James McClendon was correct, therefore, and faithful to the long Christian theological tradition to assert that “Christian beliefs are not so many ‘propositions’ to be catalogued or judged like truth-functions in a computer, but are living convictions which give shape to actual lives.”

It was not until the more recent turn towards rationalism, carried along by Enlightenment philosophers, that Christian theology seems to have been pursued as abstract knowledge divorced from Christian living.

Therefore, drawing together the various threads from Charry, Wilken, Calvin, and McClendon, theological


10 John Calvin, Institutes of the Christian Religion, 1.1.2.

education can be seen as the purposeful study of God with the purpose to know him with a knowledge that results in a life that is rich with human flourishing and can be rightly called the ‘good life.’ Put succinctly: theology is the knowledge of God that produces Christian living.

**What is Christian theological education?**

Having defined theological education as leading people to know God in order to live the “good life,” the task of Christian education must now be reconsidered. What does it mean to teach theology Christianly? Historically within the Christian school movements, the emphasis on Christian education has meant that an intentional Christian content was included in the curriculum. Therefore, educators spoke of a Christian worldview or a Christian perspective on history, biology, economics, etc. Such an understanding, however, narrowly conceives of education as merely the transmission of information. This minimalist view of education fails to see that pedagogical practices themselves arise out of particular views of humanity. One’s pedagogy, therefore, is not neutral; it is formed by one’s anthropology and theology.

In light of the long tradition of Christian formation and recent pedagogical discussions, James K.A. Smith has argued that the church and Christian educators need to return to a more biblical-Augustinian anthropology and therefore adopt a more biblical-Augustinian goal for education. First, Smith states that Christian educators have blindly adopted a secular anthropology and approach to education. He states

---

12 David I. Smith and James K.A. Smith’s *Teaching and Christian Practices: Reshaping Faith and Learning* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2011) takes up the question of the “how” of Christian education. Rather than focusing upon Christian perspectives on faith and learning, they explore various ways that one’s Christianity affects the very pedagogy that one employs. See particularly “Practices, Faith, and Pedagogy” (1-23) for a discussion of the history of Christian pedagogy.
that Christian educators have largely assumed unquestioningly the Enlightenment assumption that we are first and foremost rational creatures. While our rationality is, no doubt, integral to what it means to be human, Smith, following in the stream of Augustine and Aquinas, states that our loves and desires are at the core of our humanity.\footnote{Smith, \textit{Desiring the Kingdom}, 40-47.} Because people’s lives are governed more by affections than by intellect, the Christian educators’ pedagogy ought to be aimed more at the heart than at the head. This has implications for the anthropological assumptions undergirding much of current educational practices. Rather than seeing students as a “\textit{tabula rasa}” needing to be filled, students ought to be seen as people looking for objects to love.

Secondly, a distinctly Christian education not only has a different anthropological view of the student, it is has a different \textit{telos}—a different goal to which it is aimed. A Christian education does not aim for the accumulation of knowledge. While religious education is not anti-intellectual, it understands that knowledge is a means toward a particular end. The end to which religious knowledge points is a reoriented life—a life turned toward God. As such, Christian religious education can never create a dichotomy between doctrine and life; Christian religious instruction ought always be connected to a particular way of living.\footnote{For a discussion of the connections between religious faith, language, and living see Craig Dykstra, \textit{Growing in the Life of Faith: Education and Christian Practices} 2nd ed. (Louisville, KY: WJK, 2005), chp. 8.} James K.A. Smith summarizes both points well:

\begin{quote}
Education is not primarily a heady project concerned with providing \textit{information}; rather, education is most fundamentally a matter of \textit{formation}, a task of shaping and creating a certain kind of people. What makes them a distinctive kind of people is what they love or desire—what they envision as ‘the good life’ or the ideal picture of
\end{quote}
human flourishing. An education, then, is a constellation of practices, rituals, and routines that inculcates a particular vision of the good life by inscribing or infusing that vision into the heart (the gut) by means of material, embodied practices.\textsuperscript{15}

A Christian theological education is an education that seeks to reorient the student’s heart and mind away from the culturally informed images of the good life and toward the classically understood vision of the Christian life which arises from knowing God and being conformed according to his image. Because theological education has as its goal a knowledge of God that leads to godly living, it seems pedagogically appropriate to use examples of individuals who model a particular nearness to God. Similarly, Yust and Anderson, in \textit{Taught by God: Teaching and Spiritual Formation}, conclude that if “the work of Christian education is less about learning information and more about ‘learning Christ,’ a learning that emphasizes who we are and what we do rather than what we know, then such learning is perhaps most clearly encouraged in the many stories of the lives of saints.”\textsuperscript{16} While saintly examples can be found in numerous places, the church has passed along a collection of these exemplary individuals in the “lives of the saints.”\textsuperscript{17}

**Who qualifies to be a Saint?**

Throughout the history of the church, there has been strong division over the use of the term “saint.” Roman

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{15} Smith, \textit{Desiring the Kingdom}, 26.
\item \textsuperscript{16} Karen Marie Yust and E. Byron Anderson, \textit{Taught By God: Teaching and Spiritual Formation} (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2006), 68.
\item \textsuperscript{17} I will be using the phrase “lives of the saints” throughout the paper recognizing that it often denotes the classic genre of the saints’ lives from the early and medieval church. However, as I will demonstrate at the end of the paper, I hope to broaden the range of meaning of the phrase to include all Christians who lived well with God and are worthy of imitation.
\end{itemize}
Catholics, over time, have developed a high theology of sainthood that has come to include a formal process and criteria for canonization. According to Catholic teaching, only certain individuals who have officially demonstrated a particular “heroic sanctity” deserve the title “saint.”\(^{18}\) In contrast, Protestants seldom speak of specific “saints;” in contrast, they are quick to point out that all those who are “united to Jesus Christ” are saints.\(^{19}\)

Recognizing the difficulties of speaking of “saint” and “sainthood, I have opted for a definition that has been set forth by Lawrence Cunningham. Avoiding the complexities of his own Roman Catholic tradition, Cunningham defines a saint as “a person so grasped by a religious vision that it becomes central to his or her life in a way that radically changes the person and leads others to glimpse the value of that vision.”\(^ {20}\) Cunningham’s definition intentionally broadens sainthood beyond those who have formally been canonized into the Catholic Church. Furthermore, it recognizes that the exemplary life of the saint is for the edification of others. Cunningham notes that this ability to live a life of “sainthood” is a charisma from God; saintliness is both a gift of the Spirit and is to be for the benefit of others (1 Cor. 12:7).\(^ {21}\) In this way, Cunningham can state that all Christians are called to be saints; however, the Spirit has gifted some individuals with the peculiar gift of saintliness. Thus Cunningham is able to find a third way between the traditional Catholic and Protestant views of sainthood: all Christians are called to be saints, but some are uniquely gifted by the Spirit to be Saints.


\(^{19}\) *Westminster Confession of Faith*, Article 26.


\(^{21}\) Cunningham, *The Meaning of Saints*, 65, 80.
The Lives of the Saints as Classic Theological Texts

While a saint can be understood broadly as any person grasped by a religious vision that leads to a transformed life, the hagiographic genre that is generally referred to in the phrase “the lives of the saints” is normally intended to denote those Christians who have been recognized by the Church to be “Saints.” Therefore the phrase “lives of the saints” typically refers to a specific religious genre that arose in the early church (ca. 4th century) and was developed in the medieval era.22 These “lives of the saints” quickly became a standard and integral part of Christian piety and were used both for educational and for devotional purposes.23

However, a cursory read of any of the lives of the saints will likely raise numerous questions for the modern Protestant reader. Two important concerns must be noted, although they will not be fully addressed in this paper.24 First is the concern of historiography. After reading vivid accounts of miracles, healings, visions, and spiritual visitations the


23 Leclercq, The Love of Learning, 161-162.

attentive reader will certainly wonder whether these hagiographic accounts are historically reliable. While this is a legitimate concern for modern readers accustomed to researched biographical writing, this was not the concern for the original recipients of the saints’ lives. Instead, medievalist Jean Leclercq states that recording a person’s life accurately was subservient to edifying the reader.\textsuperscript{25} Though the ambiguity of the historical accuracy of these accounts may trouble twenty-first century readers, it ought not preclude them from being used for edification. In fact, Hubert Halbfas, author of \textit{Theory of Catechetics: Language and Experience in Religious Education}, suggests that the very foreignness and oddity of a particular religious text is often pedagogically advantageous because it causes the student to encounter a world that is strikingly different from his or her own. He writes that it “is a good idea for a teacher to give his pupils the opportunity of encountering strange ideas and experience...[The teacher; however,] is duty-bound to give an interpretation which will allow the text to speak forth, over the centuries (or whatever applies), whatever its experience is.”\textsuperscript{26} In other words, reading religious texts like the lives of the saints is like traveling abroad: it both enlarges one’s view of the world and requires the assistance of a learned guide.

The second concern with the hagiographic genre is theological. Early on in the church’s history the recounting of the heroic lives and deaths of certain Christians devolved into the “Cult of the Saints.” The cult of the saints venerated the martyrs and saints and looked to them as intercessors alongside the mediatorial role of Jesus Christ. While a technical distinction was often made between the veneration (\textit{dulia}) of the saints and the worship (\textit{latria}) of God, such a

\textsuperscript{25} Leclercq, \textit{The Love of Learning}, 161.

\textsuperscript{26} Hubert Halbfas, \textit{Theory of Catechetics: Language and Experience in Religious Education} (New York: Herder and Herder, 1971), 151.
division was hard to keep in actual practice. The sixteenth century Reformers, therefore, were right to condemn the wrongful veneration of the saints and the practice of praying to the saints. However, even the Reformers did not reject the value of the saints entirely. The Second Helvetic Confession (1556), states that while saints are not to be worshiped or invoked, they are to be honored and imitated. The Confession’s words are instructive: Protestant Christians are to acknowledge the saints as living members of Christ and friends of God who have gloriously overcome the flesh and the world. Hence we love them as brothers, and also honor them; yet not with any kind of worship but by an honorable opinion of them and just praises of them. We also imitate them. For with ardent longings and supplications we earnestly desire to be imitators of their faith and virtues, to share eternal salvation with them, to dwell eternally with them in the presence of God, and to rejoice with them in Christ. (Article 5)

Though many contemporary Protestant Christians may be unfamiliar and uncomfortable with the genre of hagiography, the Second Helvetic Confession observes that there are no theological reasons to disregard the lives of the saints as honorable and worthy of imitation. Therefore Christians ought not to be intimidated by these hagiographic accounts or to view them with undue suspicion; rather, they should receive them for what they are: “stories of simple and unassuming men and women who love God more ardently and serve God more zealously than their neighbors and friends, the kinds of persons who are present in every Christian community.”

The Purpose of the Lives in the early church

The early church recognized that in order to grow in conformity to the image of God, believers needed stories of

men and women who lived the good life—a life lived in communion with God. L. Gregory Jones observed that the earliest Christians understood that the lives of others are a “significant means whereby people glimpse examples of how we ought to live.” At first, as church historian Robert Louis Wilken observes, the church busied itself with telling stories of the death of Christians (martyrology), not their lives. It was not until Christianity had established itself as the preferred religion of the Roman Empire and persecution diminished, that the church took to writing about the actual lives of Christians. However, when the church finally began writing the lives of the saints, they did so with two express purposes: to invite others to imitate their saintly lifestyle and to provide images of the good life—a life lived well with God.

Athanasius’ *The Life of Saint Antony* was one of the first written records of a saint’s life and became a model for future hagiographies. Athanasius states in the prologue that “the life of Antony is an ideal pattern of the ascetical life” and that aspiring monastics ought to “model [their] lives after his life of zeal.” Similarly, Possidius, in his *Life of Augustine*, begins by requesting prayers from the reader in order that Possidius might “also continue to emulate and imitate [Augustine] in this world and may enjoy with him the promises of God in the world to come.”

---


fashion, Palladius’ *Lausiac History* begins with these words of purpose: “This book is a record of the virtuous asceticism and marvelous manner of life of those blessed and holy fathers, the monks and anchorites which inhabit the desert, (written) with a view of stirring to rivalry and imitation those who wish to realize the heavenly mode of life and desire to tread the road which leads to the kingdom of heaven.”

Clearly, the idea that the reader was to imitate the lives of the saints was an integral component of the early written account of the saints’ lives. However, imitation must not be understood as simple mimicking or parroting the actions of earlier saints. Rather, the imitation sought after seems to be an imitation of the saints’ general response and devotion to God. For instance, Augustine, upon hearing the childlike voice in the garden to “pick up and read,” opened the Scriptures and read the famous words from Romans. Augustine recounts what happened next:

For I had heard the story of Antony, and I remembered how he had happened to go into a church while the Gospel was being read and had taken it as a counsel addressed to himself when he heard the words *Go home and sell all that belongs to you. Give it to the poor, and so the treasure you have shall be in heaven; then come back and follow me.* By this divine pronouncement he had at once been converted to you.

The story of Antony’s conversion was a source of imitation for Augustine. Augustine’s imitation, however, was not one that led him to assume an ascetic life, but was rather an imitation of Antony’s serious and instantaneous response to God’s word. This imitation, then, is an imitation that is still...

---


34 Cunningham, *The Meaning of Saints*, 82. He notes that it is not strict imitation or emulation that is aimed at in the lives of the saints. However, it is the “intensity and seriousness of their lives that compels attention.”
relevant for today. The lives of the early Christians do not need to compel the reader to forsake all and assume an ascetical lifestyle in the Egyptian deserts. They do, however, beckon the modern reader, like Augustine, to imitate their serious devotion to God.

The second purpose of the written accounts of the saints is to enlarge the reader’s imagination of what the Christian life can (or ought to) look like. In concluding Antony’s life and commenting on how popular the desert monks had become throughout the Mediterranean world, Athanasius wrote, “For though [the desert monks] do their work in secret and though they wish to remain obscure, yet the Lord shows them forth as lamps to all men, that thus again those who hear of them may realize that the commandments can lead to perfection, and may take courage on the path to virtue.”

Michael Williams, author of *Authorised Lives in Early Christian Biography*, notes that when Athanasius speaks of Antony as a lamp to all men he intends that Antony and the rest of the saints were “to light up the world and make its true character visible.” The implication of this is that many Christians still see the world darkly; they are in need of exemplary lives to cast new light upon the world to see it as it truly is. The saint’s life was a re-imaging of what the world was meant to be and what a life with God can truly look like.

In a similar way, Palladius, a historian from the early church, colorfully admonishes his readers to consider the lives of the saints to be windows through which the reader can see and understand one’s own life. He writes, “Go near a bright window and seek encounters with holy men and women, in order that by their help you may be able to see clearly also your own heart as it were a closely-written book,

35 *The Life of Antony*, 97.

being able to discern your own slackness or neglect.”

For Palladius, like Athanasius, the saints were means of illuminating the Christian’s imagination to conceive of a world and a life that is lived for the glory of God.

Summarizing these metaphorical images of the saints, early church historian Robert Louis Wilken states that the saints’ lives were meant to illuminate the Christian imagination. He writes that the Lives “point beyond the familiar and prosaic to a higher and more noble vision of the Christian life. … The lives of the saints, in Karl Jasper’s words, serve more as ‘beacons by which to gain an orientation’ than as ‘models for imitation.’”

While Athanasius and Palladius spoke of the saints as luminaries, Theodoret of Cyrrhus described saints as living icons:

Just as painters look at their model when imitating eyes, nose, mouth, cheeks, ears, forehead, the very hairs of the head and beard … so it is fitting that each of the readers of this work [Religious History] choose to imitate a particular life and order their own life in accordance with the one they choose.

Theodoret pictures the lives of the saints as living images (icons) that are to be read and pondered. Again, Robert Louis Wilken summarizes the point well:

Stories were narrated through words, but they were really a form of seeing. They did not portray ideas, but deeds, the actions of individual human beings. … The ancient sources describe icons in the same terms used for written lives. They portrayed ‘the performance of good deeds’ and served as ‘models of virtues and of a God-pleasing

37 Palladius, The Lausiac History, sec. 15.
38 Wilken, Remembering the Christian Past, 143.
way of life.’ The icon was a ‘brief narrative’ that excited the faithful to imitate the saint who was portrayed.  

Lawrence Cunningham adds one more image for understanding the early church’s use of the lives of the saints: the saint as parable. Parables, like those of Jesus, were stories that interpreted their audience more than the audience interpreted them. Cunningham states that the lives acted in the same way; they have “a resonance and a depth that reflects back on the reader or observer of that life in such a way as to illuminate or clarify. In that sense, the life of the saint should act like a parable: It should shock us into a heightened and new sense of God’s presence (and judgment) in our own life.”  

The lives of the saints were parabolic looking-glasses that allowed the reader to see his or her own life more clearly in the light of the extraordinary life of another.

Like iconic windows into the realm of God, the lives of the saints were portals through which the reader could ponder a life lived well with God. For this reason, Michael Williams concludes that the lives of the saints, whether understood as lamps, windows, beacons, or living icons, were not detailed prescriptions for how everyone ought to live, but rather descriptions of the life that already exists for those who are living in Christ. He writes that the lives of the saints “represented a proposition about the world in which their readers lived—a vision of the contemporary world and the way it worked which departed from common experience.” According to Williams, then, the lives of the saints were invitations to see the world anew, to see it as it already is.

The purpose of the lives of the saints, then, was not an immediate one-to-one imitation, but an imitation of the

---


41 Cunningham, The Meaning of Saints, 79.

42 Williams, Authorized Lives, 183.
saint’s commitment and dedication to live out the Christian life with vigor and without compromise. The Lives were windows through which the reader could see the world as it truly is along with the possibilities that exist for those who take seriously their call to live the “good life,” increasing conformity to the image God. But more than that, the lives of the saints were an invitation to participate in that world – in a life lived well with God. Williams suggests that the lives of the saints called out to the reader saying, “This is what the world is like. ... Where do you fit in?” The challenge for the reader—whether ancient or modern—was not to understand the world in such a way as to exclude the possibility of a St. Antony or a St. Francis, but rather to adapt one’s concept of the world and the Christian life so that the extraordinary lives of the saints become possible.

The lives of the saints provide a new way of seeing the Christian life and they provide a narrative into which the Christian is called to participate. As Alasdair MacIntyre has argued, the way that we truly define ourselves and find meaning for our lives is by answering the question: Of which story do I belong? The lives of the saints call out to the reader to find his or her meaning in the story that so many saints before have already lived. Gerard Loughlin, in Telling God’s Story: Bible, Church, and Narrative Theology, describes the lives of the saints as “imperative narratives”—stories that sweep up the reader by their “imperative force” and inspire them to join with those who have already begun participating in the story of Christ. Christians, by virtue of their baptism into Christ and his church, belong to the story

43 Williams, Authorized Lives, 184.
44 Williams, Authorized Lives, 184.
45 Alasdair MacIntyre quoted in L. Gregory Jones, “For All the Saints,” 31.
of Christ and the saints who have sought to be conformed to his image. As Loughlin states, “Baptism is entry into the story of Christ as the story of the Church; as the people who are learning to grow in the strength and shape of Christ, who are learning to live in the world as people who are not of this world.” The lives of the saints invite the baptized to participate in the grand story which has begun in Christ and which fellow Christians have been participating in for two thousand years.

The lives of the saints have been an integral part of Christian formation in years past. They were intended to instruct young Christians in a way of Christian imitation, a way of being conformed to the image of Christ. They were also intended as narratives that widened one’s imagination and invited the reader to see and experience the possibilities of a life lived well with God—the truly good life.

**Reflections for Today**

The lives of the saints, by virtue of being models for imitation and windows into the divine life, are an ideal resource for modern Christian theological educators as they seek to educate in a way that turns their students’ hearts toward God and the Christian good life.

Just as the lives were originally written in order that others might consider them and imitate the saints’ devotion and commitment to living for God, the lives can still serve as models for imitation for today’s Christians. While many throughout history have sought to imitate the saints by choosing a similar monastic lifestyle, most who have read the saints’ lives chose to imitate the earnestness with which the saints lived while remaining in their given life circumstances. Likewise, by reading the exemplary lives of the saints, students could be moved to imitate their level of devotion to God.

---

Similarly, the lives of the saints can serve as invitations to re-imagine “the good life” in light of the exemplary lives of the saints. The lives of the saints can serve as “living icons” that embody the Christian ideal of “the good life.” As James K.A. Smith noted at the outset of the paper, images of the good life captivate hearts (and minds) more than mere ideas about the good life. As odd as the lives of the saints may seem to modern sensibilities, they have the potential of opening up the students’ imagination to consider the world and the Christian life anew.

By reading and remembering the lives of the saints, students are invited to imitate their godly living as well as to envision the Christian life in terms grander than their North American twenty-first century contexts generally provide for them. But there is also another benefit that comes from using the saints’ lives in teaching the Christian faith; the lives of the saints can inspire creativity and hope for the future. Almost universally, the saints were pioneers for the Christian faith; they were blazing new paths for later Christians to follow. Lawrence Cunningham comments that “the saints are at the very cutting edge of the Church; they are the harbingers and the prophets of what the Church needs to be and needs to do in a given historical moment. They are the avant-garde who testify to the needs of the time.”

The saints were not contented with the religious status quo; instead, they sought to forge new ways of living out the Christian life—at times moving to the desert (St. Antony) and at other times renouncing the wealth of the church (St. Francis). Often, saints faced resistance from the established church as they sought to live out their devotion to God. For many saints, it took retrospection by the church to fully appreciate the work of a saint. The lives of the saints, therefore, can serve as historically informed catalysts for a new generation of Christians, many of whom have become frustrated with the status quo of North American

---

Christianity, to forge new and innovative paths of Christian discipleship.

In conclusion, the classic lives of the saints can prove helpful in Christian theological education as educators seek to re-orient their students’ hearts and minds away from the culturally informed images of the good life and toward the true good life of knowing God and being conformed to his image. The saints’ lives serve as embodied examples of what a life can look like that is lived in close fellowship with God and that is being continually conformed to God’s image.
Justice and peace are hot topics in our world today. The Arab Spring reignited discussions about justice in the Middle East, what a just government consists of, and whether justice should be sought through peaceful or violent means. The Occupy movement has ignited discussions about economic justice in the United States. Although its call for an end to corruption and drastic financial disparity does not often use the word “peace,” the goal of all people having enough does fall in line with the biblical idea of shalom. Justice is being talked about by people from every social circle; no longer is it a fringe issue. In fact, anytime there is a discussion about justice it is hard to ignore the idea of shalom. People want justice and people want peace, but what those words mean to different social groups varies. Some use the words in ways that twist them to promote personal gain and advantage. Others use them to push political agendas. Still others use them to speak for the marginalized in society. Some of the ways people use the words shalom and justice are distortions while others are similar to the biblical sense of the words.

As I begin this conversation about shalom-directed justice and the church, I will start by looking at biblical themes and passages that lay out God’s vision of shalom and justice. Then, I will look at some of the ways the Association for a more Just Society (ASJ) works toward justice in Honduras. Thirdly, I will discuss the church’s role in working for justice and toward shalom, especially in the area commonly termed “social justice.” Finally, I will imagine what this means for local CRC congregations.

**Biblical Call for Shalom-Directed Justice**

As we open our Bibles to the first pages we find God’s desire and design for creation, a design that models God’s
shalom. This shalom is not simply about an absence of violence; shalom is when the world is saturated with the Holy Spirit, harmoniously flourishing with life, love and laughter. This is obviously a simplistic definition, but let’s turn to various passages of Scripture to elaborate upon God’s vision of shalom.

Genesis 1 tells us of God’s creation in which all things are created not only good, but in a state of orderliness and harmony. God created space and filled space with trees, fish, stars, flowers, moons, horses, and people. God made all things good and they fit together like diverse pieces in one beautiful puzzle. God proclaimed his creation to be good, and he gave humans the task of caring for this paradise of shalom.

The end of Genesis 1 and the following chapter go on to tell us more about God’s creation and intention for life on earth. Avila points out that in Genesis 2, God gave humans “basic and inalienable rights that are vital for full life under God.” These rights include life and fruitfulness, housing, food, work, community, responsible dominion, a healthy environment, and freedom of belief. Shalom is much more than lack of violence; it involves a beautiful creation full of purpose and potential and people seeking to worship God while developing the culture and creation around them as stewards. This is how God created the world to be; this is God’s desire. Yet we all know from life experience that this is not how the world operates. Even without knowing of the fall in Genesis 3, every human can see that the world is malfunctioning, that there are pulleys loose, bolts missing, parts rusted, and programs infected that leave God’s creation corrupted and sputtering.

God’s creation quickly went from a beautiful show room Ferrari to a junk yard K-car. Praise the Lord that God refused to leave creation that way. God refused to give up on the

---

2 Mariano Avila, “Seeds of Justice, Harvest of Shalom,” class notes.
creation. God set out to redeem and restore the world, to recapture and achieve his vision of shalom for the world. And that is the story we read of from Genesis 4 to Revelation 22.

God began this restoration plan through Abraham and his descendants, the Israelites. Yet it is important to remember that God’s vision of shalom was never simply for the Israelites. God chose to use one nation to bless all nations. This is clear in God’s promise to Abraham in Genesis 12:2-3; God is going to bless Abraham and bless all nations through him. God’s gifts and God’s blessings can never be restricted or claimed by one people group. God’s blessing and God’s vision of shalom is for all people and all of creation.

Throughout Scripture, God reminds us of what the world was and what it will be again. Zechariah 8, Isaiah 65, and Revelation 21-22 are three fantastic passages where God paints a marvelous picture of his future kingdom of shalom. No child will die young. Children will play carefree in the streets. People will own their homes and receive the fruit of their labor. Dew will fall from heaven and the crops will flourish. There will be no war and even natural predators and their prey will lie down together. There will be no more tears or crying or pain. The tree of life will be for the healing of the nations. And above all, God will dwell with people in a restored and renewed creation. These passages, and many more, are postcards from God showing and telling us of his creation of shalom that is coming.

In the Gospels we also get a foretaste of the kingdom of God in Jesus’ ministry. Jesus brings a kingdom that is good news for the poor, the outcasts, the diseased and crippled, the foreigner, the stormy waters, and all of creation. Yet as Jesus ushers in the kingdom of God, we see that this kingdom confuses the world around him. In Matthew 8-9 Jesus breaks cultural norms and offends the religious leaders as he shows that God’s shalom is for all people. In these chapters Jesus touches and cleanses dirty and unclean lepers and a
hemorrhaging woman. He heals the servant of a centurion, the servant of a foreigner who is part of the army oppressing Israel. He eats with sinners and tax-collectors, men who sold their souls to the Roman Empire for financial wealth, showing no loyalty to Israel. Jesus is dining with and healing those the Messiah should be judging. Jesus is inviting all people into the kingdom of God and helping all of creation move toward the visions of Zechariah, Isaiah, and John.

However, in the 2000 years since Jesus’ life on earth, God has not brought his kingdom fully and the earth has not been restored into the biblical visions of God’s kingdom of shalom. The kingdom has not come and God’s will is not being done on earth as it is in heaven. The reasons for this are many. Obviously, God has not chosen to return and restore all things. Also obvious is the fact that the devil is still present and active in the world. But beyond these two supernatural factors, humans are inhibiting God’s shalom by failing to live justly. A shalom-saturated creation is only possible when justice is sought for all of creation. This is not our reality. Our reality is one in which sinful greed, power, pride, and a myriad of other factors drive humans to live unjust lives, to live in ways that take advantage of humans and creation for their own comfort and pleasure. Although this injustice assaults all of creation, I will focus specifically on the injustices perpetrated against humans. I do not do this to devalue the need for justice and stewardship in the other aspects of the created world; I do this because most of the work of ASJ is focused on the relationships of humans to humans. Yet before we look at the work of ASJ, let’s continue looking to Scripture to see what God has to say about justice.

As we stated earlier, God decided to use Abraham and his descendants to bless all nations and bring shalom to the earth. In Genesis 18:19 God says, “I have chosen [Abraham], so that he will direct his children and his household after him to keep the way of the LORD by doing what is right and just.” God’s blessing and shalom will come
to the world through just actions. Abraham and his descendants have been chosen by God for the task of shalom-living that is characterized by justice and righteousness.

As Scripture takes us on a narrative journey with Abraham and his descendants, we quickly come to a point where these chosen people are themselves victims of injustice as slaves to the Egyptians. The descendants of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob are forced to work for Pharaoh, to use their blood and sweat to build an empire that is not their own. The Egyptians are not being just, they are not treating the Israelites as divine image bearers of God, and God acts. God performs great miracles to free the Israelites and delivers them from the clutches of slavery and injustice. Chris Wright says, “The explicit trigger for God’s action is his concern for the suffering of the oppressed. God’s action was decisively against the oppressor and for the oppressed. God’s action of justice was based on love for his people and faithfulness to his promise.”

God hated the oppression of the Egyptians against the Israelites; it did not fit with his design for the world. So God acted in miraculous ways to free the slaves, to loose the chains of injustice.

As we follow Israel out of Egypt and into the wilderness, we read about God’s law for his people. At Sinai God gave the people his law which placed justice as the social foundation for Israel. If the people obeyed God’s law and lived justly, the nations would see God’s shalom in Israel and be drawn toward Israel and their God; Israel would be a light in the darkness. The Israelites were called to live justly in all aspects of life. Leviticus 19 is a wonderful chapter that lays out the various areas of life in which the Israelites must live justly. God’s shalom will be seen when justice is practiced in interactions with family, friends, and coworkers; in the treatment of foreigners, the poor, the disabled, widows, and

---

the elderly; when justice dictates the laws, legal systems, commercial practices, and care for land and animals; when women are protected and dignified and when human sexuality is respected as a gift from God; and God’s shalom will come when people worship the true God, the God of Abraham and the Creator of the cosmos.\(^4\) In Leviticus 19 we see that justice is required in every aspect of life and guides all of our relationships. Abraham Kuyper said that as we interact with others we must recognize “in each person [the] human worth, which is his by virtue of his creation after the Divine likeness, and therefore of the equality of all human beings before God.”\(^5\) No one is more or less valuable than another. No individual can use or abuse another because all are created in God’s likeness and all humans are God’s beloved children.

Justice was foundational at creation. Justice guided God’s law for Israel at Sinai, and continued to be the calling of Israel as they developed into a nation. As Israel developed and grew, God raised up judges and then kings to lead his people according to justice. In 1 Kings 10:9 the Queen of Sheba proclaims Solomon’s task from God with these words: “Praise be to the LORD your God, who has delighted in you and placed you on the throne of Israel. Because of the LORD’s eternal love for Israel, he has made you king, to maintain justice and righteousness.” Solomon, like every other leader of Israel since Abraham, had the task of maintaining justice and righteousness. Faithful service to God involved much more than religious practice; it included justice directed toward shalom.

As we continue the narrative journey with Israel, we see that many of the leaders failed in their God given task. They failed to maintain justice. They failed to care for the foreigner, poor, widow, elderly, disabled, women, and many

\(^4\) Avila, “Seeds of Justice, Harvest of Shalom,” class notes.

other aspects of God’s creation. Isaiah 5:7b says that God “looked for justice, but saw bloodshed; for righteousness, but heard cries of distress.” As Israel failed to embrace justice as God’s path to shalom, God opened the mouths of the prophets to cry out against the injustice and call the people back toward the ways of God. Roland de Vaux gives a good summary of the message and critique of the prophets:

The prophets condemn their contemporaries for their luxury in building (Hos. 8:14; Am. 3:15; 5:11), in entertainment (Is. 5:11-12; Am. 6:4), and in dress (Is. 3:16-24). They condemn the buying up of the land by those ‘who add house to house and join field to field till there is no room left’ (Is. 5:8). The wealth of the day was in fact badly distributed and often ill-gotten: ‘If they covet fields they seize them; if houses, they take them” (Mi 2:2). The rich landlords would speculate and defraud others (Hos. 12:8; Am. 8:5; Mi. 2:1), the judges took bribes (Is. 1:23; Jer. 5:28; Mi. 3:11; 7:3), and the creditors knew no pity (Am. 2:6-8; 8:6).6

Essentially, the powerful of Israel were living corrupt and greed-driven lives. They were taking advantage of others and treating people as tools rather than God’s image bearers.

Micah 6:8 encapsulates the message of the prophets: “And what does the Lord require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God.” The prophets call the people to return to God and a life of justice that leads to shalom.

Although we have just begun to scratch the surface of what the Bible has to say about God’s desire for justice, we will end our brief biblical survey by looking at Jesus and his ministry. We have already seen how God brought the kingdom of God through Jesus’ miracles and treatment of the marginalized. Avila says, “Jesus’ ministry presented a frontal attack on all the forces of sin and evil that oppress human

Jesus brought God’s kingdom of shalom to earth and showed all people what it looks like to act justly and love mercy. Jesus summarizes the requirements of the Old Testament law with two simple commands: love God and love your neighbor. In this, Jesus is calling us to love all people we encounter and seek the good of all of those within our spheres of influence. Nicholas Wolterstorff intertwines the familiar command to love your neighbor with seeking justice for our neighbors. Wolterstorff writes, “Treating the neighbor justly is an example of loving him, a way of loving him. Love is not justice-indifferent benevolence.” Loving our neighbors means showing kindness and mercy, but it also means treating them justly and actively working for the justice of all those who suffer injustice. Wolterstorff says this New Testament agape love that Jesus models and commands “joins seeking to promote a person’s good with seeking to secure due respect for her worth.” Jesus’ love for others, and the love that we ought to give to others, is an active love that promotes and respects all people. This love is not passive. This love is not casual. This love requires the empowerment of the Holy Spirit, the denial of sinful desires, and a passion for all of creation to experience God’s shalom. This justice-infused love is what God desires for the cosmos and what is required as we strive toward God’s vision for the world in Zechariah 8, Isaiah 65, and Revelation 21-22.

**Shalom-Directed Justice in Honduras**

Through our brief sketch of Scripture we have encountered several passages in which God’s desire for justice is clearly seen. God wants shalom, and God’s shalom cannot be experienced on earth without the work of the Holy Spirit and

---

7 Mariano Avila, “A Shalom Kingdom as an Alternative to Empire,” class notes.


the people of God who tirelessly work toward justice in all areas of life. As Christians, we proclaim that Jesus came and brought God’s kingdom of shalom, yet the reality is that God’s kingdom has not fully come. We live in a time of tension: the already and the not yet. God’s kingdom has come, yet sin and evil still exist. In this time the church is given the task of obediently loving God and loving our neighbors through an active, justice-seeking love.

This call to radical love can be difficult and discouraging. We must not underestimate the brokenness of the world and the works of the devil, but we also must not underestimate God’s power and the working of the Holy Spirit. We may feel pessimistic when we see oppressive and selfish people seemingly rule the world through acts of grave injustice, but we must also open our eyes to see the kingdom of God breaking in all around us. We must notice the ways God is working to heal and restore.

One of the places we can see the kingdom of God breaking into the world is through the work of the Association for a more Just Society in Tegucigalpa, Honduras. ASJ bravely and tirelessly works to bring justice and shalom to the people and nation of Honduras. I am not going to summarize all of the different projects of ASJ; instead, I am going to share some of the ways that I saw God’s kingdom of justice and shalom breaking into the present reality during my time in Honduras this past January.

One place the in-breaking of the kingdom of God was blatantly visible was at the hillside community of The Pines. Our class stood in the shade in front of a little shop, surrounded by the sound of trucks rumbling by and children laughing and playing behind us. We stood in a circle and listened to the elected leader of the community talk about the process of land and home ownership in The Pines. As this man gave us a tour of his community, his eyes glimmered with a joyful pride and excitement while he pointed out the various buildings and areas around us. This was his community. This was his home. And because of the work of
ASJ he and his neighbors owned, or soon would own, their homes and lots. They had a place of their own, a place to raise families and leave for the next generation. A place to develop and improve. A place to live out the vision of shalom that God has for the world. Make no mistake, there is still much brokenness in the community and the larger systems that govern the people’s lives, but there is hope for a better future. The leaders we spoke to love their community and are so excited to see it flourish and blossom into something more and more beautiful. And beyond that, they are excited to use their new knowledge to help other communities advance in the process of land ownership. The vision is infectious and is spreading from community to community. God’s desire for people to live in their own homes and reap the fruit of their labor is emerging as a reality.

Related to home ownership is the ownership of a business. Huddled in the corner of a small shop, with bags of chips dangling in front of my face and a barred window to my left, I heard the voice of an entrepreneur proudly talk about her business. Thanks to a micro-loan program, this sweet woman is able to make a living, support her family, and experience the dignity of working and reaping the benefits of her labor. She is experiencing part of the vision of shalom that we find in Isaiah 65:21, “They will build houses and dwell in them; they will plant vineyards and eat their fruit.” The kingdom of God is being experienced in this woman’s life through her shop and work.

Beyond property ownership and business development, the kingdom of God involves healing, restoration, and transformation. I saw these aspects of God’s kingdom of shalom as I watched a young boy mix concrete for constructing a new kitchen. Not only was an old kitchen being transformed and restored into something better, but the boys working had been transformed. These former gang members are on a journey of transformation from lives full of hate and destruction to constructive lives of love. I don’t
know where they were in this journey, but I got the feeling that they were at a similar place in life as the kitchen was when we left that day: the new was not completed, but it was visible and heading in the right direction.

Another thing that seemed to be heading in the right direction was educational reform in Honduras. I was amazed to hear how the effort of a new organization called Transformemos Honduras (TH) had caused such large changes in less than two years. Carlos Hernandez, the leader of TH and co-founder of ASJ, told us of the corruption in the educational system and the enormous gap between the money designated for education and the actual quality of education in Honduras. Carlos said one problem is that 15,000 people were found to be receiving teacher’s salaries without actually teaching. Along with passing legislation that would imprison perpetrators of this corruption, TH came up with a simple and creative way of helping eliminate the problem. TH was working to make the payrolls of each school available to the parents of students so they can see if all of the “teachers” on the payroll actually teach at their children’s schools. Simple strategies like this have the potential to transform the system and root out corruption by giving the people a voice to speak out and the knowledge needed to act.

Although I could continue to recount experience after experience in which I saw the in-breaking of the kingdom of God in Honduras through ASJ and its work toward justice, I will end this section by mentioning a defining characteristic of the people who work for and with ASJ: courage. The work ASJ does is dangerous; it makes people angry. In fact, one of the ways the organization decides if something is a justice issue that they should address is if it will make someone mad. If someone is going to get angry because of the ASJ working toward justice, then it is work that should be done. Kurt Verbeek, co-founder of ASJ, said that Christians are rarely described as brave and courageous, but that is exactly what we should be. One of the favorite verses of the staff at
ASJ is 1 John 4:18a, “There is no fear in love. But perfect love drives out fear.” Christians ought to be brave, boldly working for justice and God’s kingdom of shalom. ASJ identifies itself as: “Brave Christians dedicated to making Honduras’ system of laws and government work properly to do justice for the poor, and inspiring Christians to do justice.” The work of ASJ, and the Christian life, is a call to courageously spread God’s justice-infused love throughout the world. And in places where Christians are courageous, like The Pines and other areas of Tegucigalpa, the kingdom of shalom can be seen breaking into the world.

**Social Justice and the Church**

The work of ASJ is inspiring; it is exciting to see brave Christians working toward justice in the world. But ASJ is an organization, not a church, and it leaves me wondering what the role of the church might be in justice work like that which I saw in Honduras.

The main problem is defining the role of the church. The Belgic Confession in Article 29 says that the true church engages in pure preaching of the Word, pure administration of the sacraments, and practices church discipline. These three things are good, but they seem like a very minimalist definition of church; those are three things the church must do, but it also must do more. The question is what?

In a class at Calvin Seminary, I was taught that the church as institution should do the following five things:

1. Engage society in order to carry out the Great Commission.
2. Demonstrate respect and pray for government officials.
3. Show mercy to those who suffer, regardless of the reason they suffer.
4. Try to identify what is clearly evil according to Scripture and help change such things to something permissible.
5. Encourage individual Christians to engage in social justice.\textsuperscript{10}

The problem with this list is that \#3 and \#5 seem to be contradictory, as do \#4 and \#5. I agree fully that the church should show mercy to those who suffer, yet the church often views “acts of mercy” as those things that meet short-term needs rather than deeper social and systemic structures which are the root causes of the felt needs. If the church does not engage in social justice, which is typically associated with the systemic issues, then the church is allowing evils to continue, the very thing \#4 speaks against. But the fourth point also has problems with interpretation. What are the evils that must change? I have argued that the biblical vision of God’s kingdom of shalom should guide us to work against all injustices in society. Any injustice is impermissible in the kingdom of God; therefore, the church should work tirelessly at ending all injustice. This contradicts the fifth point, and commonly held view, that social justice is to be engaged by individual Christians, or the “organic” church. The tension lies between the roles of the institutional church and the organic church. This tension led Dom Helder Camara, Archbishop of Recife and Olinda, Brazil to say, “If I feed the poor, people say that I am a saint; but if I ask why people are poor, they call me a communist.”\textsuperscript{11} Camara expressed his frustration with a commonly held idea that the church can meet short-term needs, but not fight the systemic issues that cause the suffering.

I don’t know where this division between the organic and institutional church arose. Perhaps it was a reaction against the corruption found in the all-powerful church of the middle-ages. Perhaps it is a wise guideline based on mistakes of the past of which I am simply unaware. I just

\textsuperscript{10} Editors’ Note: The author has chosen to keep the course and professor anonymous.

\textsuperscript{11} Dom Helder Camara. Quoted by Dr. Avila, “Seeds of Justice, Harvest of Shalom,” class notes.
don’t know. Those who support the division believe that it guards the church from dangers such as worldliness, decreased interest in evangelism, and baptizing certain political issues as the “Christian position;” but it also weakens the potential the church has to transform the brokenness of the world into the kingdom of God’s shalom. The division between the organic and institutional church is crippling the church and leaving it ineffective and apathetic. The division does not seem to be biblically mandated and the dangers it is thought to avoid are still infiltrating local churches. Churches are still worldly, churches lack evangelistic fervor, and many churches baptize particular political issues as the “Christian” position.

Perhaps if the “organic” church was succeeding at doing justice I would not be so adamantly against the distinction between “big C” and “little c” church. But justice is not being done well. In his discussion of Psalm 33:5, Chris Wright says, “Righteousness and justice are concrete nouns; they are actual things that you do, not concepts that you reflect upon.” The problem is that righteousness and justice are not being done well by either individuals or the institutional church, yet scripture clearly calls Christians and the church to do justice. There is no distinction in scripture between the organism and the institution, the church as a whole must work for justice. Later, Wright cites Amos 5:21-24, Isaiah 1:10-17, 58:2-7, and Jeremiah 7:1-11 and says, “The duty of justice to the afflicted is so central that if it is not fulfilled, God will not even accept the divinely ordained sacrifices and worship.” These acts of worship that God rejected were not simply done by individuals in their homes; these were performed by what could be termed the “institutional” part of the Jewish faith. God demands shalom-focused justice. It’s that simple. It is required for all

12 Wright, Old Testament Ethics for the People of God, 257.
13 Wright, Old Testament Ethics for the People of God, 267.
Christians and includes the community in its formal and informal structures.

Jesus, in his ministry on earth, did not seem to have an idea of the church that was limited to a definition as minimalistic as Article 29 of the Belgic Confession. His ministry involved preaching the word and healing the sick. Jesus gave us the sacraments and criticized the politics and systems of his time. Jesus disciplined his disciples while challenging them to live lives that treated all people justly. And when the church began to spread and organize in the years after Jesus’ life on earth, Peter and Paul did not seem to restrict the activities of social justice to the organic church. Instead of being a helpful distinction, the separation of the organism and institution seems to take the church off the hook for engaging in difficult social issues and passes the blame for lack of societal transformation to the people.

What a shame. What a waste. The church could be a powerful organizational tool full of rich and diverse resources that could lead the charge in societal transformation. In Honduras, most branches of the Church are focused on the “spiritual” aspects of Christianity. In the United States, the CRC often seems contented with the status quo and the luxuries that come with being a middle to upper class club. Wolterstorff, quoting Outka, says that, “The person who treats others with agape considers, ‘the interests of others and not simply his own. Others are to be regarded for their own sakes, for what they may want or need, and not finally because they bring benefits to the agent.’”14 Too often churches act when something benefits them or one of their members. The church is not willing to love lavishly and courageously in ways that bring justice to all people of their community. The self-centeredness of American culture has infected church culture and led us to passionless lethargy and apathy. We are content with a church that preaches some of the Word and allows us to walk out of the building on

14 Wolterstorff, Justice in Love, 27.
Sunday mornings loved but unconvicted, consoled but unchallenged.

Don’t get me wrong, the church must focus on preaching the Word and challenge people to holy living. The problem is that holiness is only one of many things that God desires from his children. Avila says that in the “Golden Rule” Jesus puts mercy before holiness; holiness is perverse without working toward shalom through mercy and justice.¹⁵ Like the Jews, the CRC often has a false assurance and confidence based on trust in our worship practices and our status as an elect, covenantal people. We are confident that our worship pleases God and we cling to the assurance of our salvation through God’s grace and covenant faithfulness. These two things that are true, but by clinging to these we are blind to the other parts of God’s calling for us.

My plea is this: that the church, institutional and organic, remove its blindfold so it can see the injustice around it, and that the institutional church unbind its hands so that it can work powerfully toward God’s vision and kingdom of shalom in the world.

Avila notes that in the Gospel of Matthew, two main ideas are articulated about the church and its mission of shalom:

The first is that Jesus wanted an inclusive Church, a church for all nations and all kinds of peoples, a church in which reconciliation is visible and the practice of the justice of God’s kingdom is an everyday practice by Christians. The second is that the shalom of human beings is much more important than religious practices, marketing techniques, and good statistics.¹⁶

Again, I want to stress that holiness and corporate worship are good and necessary. However, as Leviticus 19:9-10 shows, “we express our spirituality not only in the worship

¹⁵ Avila, “A Shalom Kingdom as an Alternative to Empire,” class notes.

¹⁶ Avila, “A Shalom Kingdom as an Alternative to Empire,” class notes.
of God but in acts of solidarity with the disenfranchised of the earth.”\textsuperscript{17} “Unless we incarnate today the kind of ministry Jesus did and commanded us to do in his name, characterized by compassion and service to others, we will not be fulfilling the great commission he wanted us to do.”\textsuperscript{18} It is time for the church, all conceivable aspects and subsections of the church, to take seriously God’s command to work for justice. God desires nothing less than shalom on the earth, and shalom cannot be experienced while injustices exist down the street and around the globe.

**What can the local CRC do?**

At this point we must ask what the local church can do to work for justice down the street and around the globe. All of this talk about God’s kingdom of shalom sounds incredible, but what can actually be done? J. Milburn Thompson may help us move in the right direction:

> Central to the biblical presentation of justice is that the justice of a community is measured by its treatment of the powerless in society. ... The way society responds to the needs of the poor through its public policies is the litmus test of its justice or injustice.\textsuperscript{19}

Thompson was writing about society at large, but the same could be said about the church and Christian community. If the government or other institutions and organizations are not caring for the poor, the church must act and respond to the needs of the powerless and oppressed in society. Later Thompson goes on to point out that the goal is not equality for everyone, but equity:

\textsuperscript{17} Avila, “Seeds of Justice, Harvest of Shalom,” class notes.

\textsuperscript{18} Avila, “A Shalom Kingdom as an Alternative to Empire,” class notes.

Equality (roughly equal incomes throughout a society) is not the goal of development, but equity (fair distribution) seems essential for genuine human development. The goal is to meet the basic needs of everyone in a society so that each person has the opportunity to flourish and to participate in and contribute to the community. The aim is not to bring down the rich but to remove the crippling obstacle of poverty so that everyone has enough.\(^{20}\)

Thompson here speaks of equity as the goal of development, yet a few word changes would make this statement define God’s vision of shalom. God desires that all people flourish and contribute to the community; God desires that all people have enough to live full lives neither having to worry about a lack of housing, food, or work; nor being treated in hateful and undignified ways. The church has the responsibility of working toward shalom through justice for all, and there are many ways the church can do this.

The first step of the local church in this process is to be incarnational. The church must be in relationship with the marginalized. The church must live life next to those who are experiencing injustice. At the same time, some churches must also live life next to those perpetrating injustice; both groups need God’s grace and God’s kingdom of shalom. No matter where a church is located, true incarnation means ministry must occur around the church building and church members should live in the neighborhood of the church and its ministries. In Honduras, Kurt Verbeek and Carlos Hernandez, the founders of ASJ, live in one of the poorest and most violent neighborhoods in Honduras. They live with the people they are trying to help. They refuse to listen to middle class fears regarding the poor. Instead, they love their neighbors and embrace 1 John 4:18, “There is no fear in love, but perfect love drives out fear.” Their neighbors know and respect them. Their neighbors trust them. And even more importantly, their neighbors minister to Kurt and Carlos just

as much as they are ministered to by Kurt and Carlos. The church must be incarnate in the neighborhood and understand that their neighbors and the marginalized in the city can offer the church just as much as the church can offer the marginalized.

The next step for the church is to listen. The church needs to listen to the people who are oppressed and learn from them what needs may exist. Jay Van Groningen, author of *Communities First*, stresses the need to listen to the community. When Van Groningen brought my class to Heights of Hope in Holland, Michigan, we learned that a community developer named Tracy began her ministry to the community by simply meeting neighbors and listening to the needs they saw in the community. If the church is going to make a difference, it cannot come in with a colonialist mentality that thinks it knows what is best for the community. The church must embrace the voices and assets of the community in order to effectively work toward shalom.

After listening and observing, it is time for the church to act. Dr. Avila says we must, “Be open to recognizing the obligations that the needs of the other place upon one, and do not allow any in-group/out-group classifications to deafen one’s ear or harden one’s heart.”21 This action can take hundreds of forms depending on the needs and assets within the community. One form of action may be fulfilling the role of the prophetic voice that challenges the leadership and systems of society. The local church has the ability to unite hundreds of people in challenging the government to fulfill its various roles such as providing quality public education, access to health care, offering affordable transportation, or hundreds of other things. The church can educate, raise awareness, and organize activities such as letter writing campaigns or public dialogues with public officials. The

opportunities are endless and simply require a passionate desire to work toward justice.

Perhaps some of the justice problems do not fit within the role of the government or no government agency or local organization wants to address the problem, what can the church do then? Let’s look at public transportation as an example. If there is no public transportation in a town, the local church could take initiative and work toward establishing community transportation. A congregation could purchase a van or bus and develop a route that may connect low-income housing to businesses and industrial areas. This would connect the area in which people may be less likely to have resources to purchase a car with the areas of employment in a city. This solution could become financially self-sustaining through charging fares, but may need the resources and care of a church to give it a kick-start. Solutions to justice issues may not be difficult, they may simply require creativity and a desire to help those in need.

When I was at the national conference of the Christian Community Development Association this fall, I heard of many creative solutions to situations of injustice in various communities. Churches in Pittsburg helped begin lending programs that combated the predatory payday loan companies. An urban church in Chicago worked to bring businesses into a poor neighborhood so that employment and increased capital entered the neighborhood. Churches have given microloans for businesses, encouraged businesses to hire returning citizens, offered occupational training, beautifully embraced and supported single mothers and their children through mentoring programs and child care, bravely befriended gang members and invited them to join constructive activities, and myriads of other things. There is no rule for what actions a church must do to promote justice, but there is no end to what a church can do. The church can creatively work for shalom. This includes immediate, short-term needs but should go beyond the traditional acts of
mercy to challenge and change the systems that perpetrate injustice.

Perhaps the most important thing is that the local church not ignore the voice of the oppressed. “It is certain that, where there is the legitimation of structure without the voice of pain embraced, there will be oppression without compassion.” The church must listen to the voices of the oppressed and engage the corruption and manipulation in the societal systems so that the kingdom of God may be experienced on earth as it is in heaven.

This discussion of shalom-directed justice in the church may seem overwhelming if one has never thought of the church working against social systems. This way of thinking expands the mission of the church from its current parameters while also expanding the ways we share God’s love with the neighborhood and the world. Working for justice in love requires eyes to see, ears to hear, and hands that are willing to act. Working for shalom requires courageous Christians who think and act in creative ways. The call of God is demanding and difficult, but it is also life-giving and good news for all people, regardless of the poverty or riches of a person. When the local church embraces its call to shalom-directed justice it will be a bright light in the darkness, a bold witness of God’s love for all people.

As each Christian and each congregation shifts its thinking, it is good to start with Jesus’ simple command: love God and love your neighbor as yourself. Wolterstorff says,

> It is impossible actively to seek to promote the flourishing of everyone, let alone trying to do so equally. … What is always possible, however, and what one should always

---

do, is care about everyone by seeing to it that one treats no one unjustly.\textsuperscript{23}

Start by loving lavishly and listening to your neighbors, then begin taking courageous steps toward transformation, toward God’s kingdom of shalom. By taking one courageous step after another, the church can work against the injustices down the street and around the globe so that the in-breaking of God’s kingdom of shalom can be experienced in every neighborhood and every life.

\textsuperscript{23} Wolterstorff, \textit{Justice in Love}, 131.
Martin Luther on Vocation: Bridging the Gap between Creation and the Eschaton

Reita Yazawa

Introduction

One of the current debates on vocation concerns itself with the robust relationship between protology (creation) and eschatology. While Lee Hardy proposes a theology of vocation rooted in a balanced view of creation, fall, and eschaton, Miroslav Volf, suspecting that Lee’s view is dominantly protological, suggests a theology of work centered on eschatology and pneumatological, gift-oriented approach. Volf’s critique of vocation as occupation stems from his interpretation of Martin Luther’s view of vocation. Volf rightly argues that Luther’s view of vocation is occupation- or station-based and articulated according to the creational order. The issue at stake in this debate is how it is possible to formulate a robust relationship between protology (creation) and eschatology (eschaton).

---

1 This is a significantly abridged version of a research paper originally submitted to Professor Lee Hardy on May 21, 2010 for Moral Theology: Theology of Vocation.


Many of the scholarly treatments focus on Luther’s view of vocation in its relation to creational order. This is rightly so because Luther located vocation only in the earthly life. However, few studies identify problems hidden in it and explore possible alternatives. There are some arguments that Luther’s theology correlates creational order with critical function of eschatology; but in his view of vocation, the creational order will ultimately pass away.

This paper aims at identifying a problem with Luther’s view of vocation in its clear-cut severance of faith and love and at suggesting an alternative distinction between salvation and its testimony manifested in faith and love. Luther’s stark contrast between the law and the gospel, between love and faith, between the earthly life and the heavenly life, or creation and the eschaton, fails to give vocation its eschatological significance. While his view that vocation does not count to one’s salvation is a sober reminder of possible human hubris, vocation can be viewed, as hinted by Richard Mouw, as prefiguration and anticipation of the coming kingdom.

In order to demonstrate this thesis, I will discuss how this clear-cut contrast of faith and love affects Luther’s view of vocation. Then, I will introduce a different

---


view of vocation espoused by Richard Mouw and propose an eschatological significance of vocation which does not undermine Luther’s battle-cry of justification by faith alone.

**A Problem with Luther’s View: Dichotomy of Creation and Eschaton**

Luther vehemently distinguished between the Law and faith when the issue of justification is at stake. In the context of the saint’s struggle in the remaining earthly life, however, the Law claims its own realm as the practice of love to neighbors. It is in this context of love that Luther’s view of vocation is properly placed.

Luther makes a distinction between the earthly kingdom (kingdom of the world) and the heavenly kingdom (kingdom of Christ).

The kingdom of the world is the kingdom of sin, death, the devil, blasphemy, despair, and eternal death. But the kingdom of Christ is the kingdom of grace, forgiveness of sins, comfort, salvation, and eternal life, into which we have been transferred (Col. 1:13) by our Lord Jesus Christ, to whom be glory forever.  

These two realms represent “two ways which God has of dealing in his creative goodness with men, who are sinful.”

The kingdom of heaven pertains to justification and salvation of the saint and has its jurisdiction in human conscience. The kingdom of earth pertains to the external work and love to the neighbor in this temporal life. For Luther, vocation belongs to this earthly kingdom. In this life, even the saint is still living under the burden of the Law when the external duties matter. Thus Luther concedes: “But in a matter apart from conscience, when outward duties must

---


be performed, then, whether you are a preacher, a magistrate, a husband, a teacher, a pupil, etc., this is no time to listen to the Gospel. You must listen to the Law and follow your vocation.”

In short, “conscience belongs to the heavenly kingdom, and the body to the earthly kingdom.”

However, this “juxtaposition of earth and heaven” creates a problem. Luther vehemently severs faith and work, while assigning faith to the heavenly kingdom and work to the earthly kingdom. As a result, significant discontinuity is created between the earthly kingdom and the heavenly kingdom. Since only justification and the forgiveness of sins prevail in the heavenly realm, no products or fruits of human work on earth can count in heaven.

In this life, a believer experiences both of the competing powers: internally, the heavenly realm, and externally, the earthly realm. Yet at the end of time, only the heavenly kingdom will triumph and all the transient earthly components will fade away. Luther regards work as one of those earthly, transient components. In other words, work has nothing to do with the heavenly kingdom. In the heavenly realm, people will not think about what to do or what to make. Indeed, “the law shall not rule up there.”

Wingren points out: “man is not to effect anything there. This is the essential characteristic of the kingdom of heaven. There is no place for vocation, works, or love as man’s accompaniment. Only faith may enter. All the rest is placed

---

10 Luther, Lectures on Galatians 1535 Chapters 1-4, 26:117.
11 Wingren, Luther on Vocation, 166.
12 Wingren, Luther on Vocation, 66.
14 Luther, “Predigten des Jahres 1531,” in WA, 34:27. The translation is from Wingren, Luther on Vocation, 248.
on the earthly level, where his neighbor needs it.”\textsuperscript{15} In sum, vocation “belongs to this world, not to heaven; it is directed toward one’s neighbor, not toward God.”\textsuperscript{16}

This radical dichotomy between protology and eschatology may cause several problems. First, as Volf criticizes, Luther’s understanding of work can be “indifferent toward alienation in work.”\textsuperscript{17} Karl Marx observed that modern industrial work tends to become independent from workers and stands against them to the detriment of human nature and creativity.\textsuperscript{18} Excessive hours of work in factories doing menial and monotonous work deprive workers of the joy and the unfolding of personal potentiality which labor can provide. By placing work or vocation only in relation to materiality and creational orders in this earthly life, Luther’s view of vocation cannot motivate workers to engage positively in cultural activities for God’s glory. Luther’s view of vocation does not help to evaluate and reform these dehumanizing working conditions.

Second, relating to the first problem, Luther’s view of vocation can be misappropriated to justify any work as divinely ordained. It can thereby be “easily misused ideologically.”\textsuperscript{19} In Luther, vocation prompts ascetic life in the secular world. Yet its transformative power is limited to each individual’s self-discipline. It does not become a social transformative power in relation to the eschatological vision of the coming kingdom. Luther claims: “The gospel…does not become involved in the affairs of this world, but speaks of our life in the world in terms of suffering, injustice, the cross, patience, and contempt for this life and temporal

\textsuperscript{15} Wingren, \textit{Luther on Vocation}, 16.

\textsuperscript{16} Wingren, \textit{Luther on Vocation}, 10.

\textsuperscript{17} Volf, \textit{Work in the Spirit}, 107.


\textsuperscript{19} Volf, \textit{Work in the Spirit}, 108.
wealth.”

He also advises: “Remain in your station in life, be it high or low, and continue in your vocation.” This attitude can easily lead to an understanding that a Christian should “accept the situation and prepare to suffer injustice.” Acceptance of social stations as given from God makes it difficult to reform and re-orientate social conditions.

Bridging Creation and Eschaton: Vocation Prefigures the Eschaton

Luther limits vocation only to the earthly realm and envisions the future realization only of the content of faith: seeing God with full knowledge of him. The Reformer seems to think that only faith endures and that all the other earthly materials will pass away at the end of history. However, this is not the only way to articulate the relation between creation and the eschaton.

Volf identifies two different ways of conceiving the creation-eschaton relation. One is a total destruction of the creation (annihilatio mundi). In this case, vocation does not have any eternal significance since the accumulation of all human works will be destroyed and pass away (2 Pet 3:10). Luther’s view of the eschaton seems to be closer to this vision. The other way is the transformation of the world (transformatio mundi). In this alternative, creation will not be destroyed but cleansed, purified, and completed as the new heaven and new earth. Accordingly, the accumulation of


21 Martin Luther, Predigen des Jahres 1544, in WA, 49:609. The translation is from Wingren, Luther on Vocation, 130.

22 Wingren, Luther on Vocation, 112.

23 See also Wingren, Luther on Vocation, 111, 112, and 187.

24 Volf, Work in the Spirit, 89.
human work will not pass away but will be transformed and integrated into the new order. In this case, vocation has significance and relevance for the world to come.

Each in its own way, faith and human work should stand in the service of the new creation. Not that the result of human work should or could create and replace ‘heaven.’ They can never do that; though, charmed with success, people often forget that simple truth. Rather, after being purified in the eschatological transformatio mundi, they will be integrated by an act of divine transformation into the new heaven and the new earth. Hence the expectation of the eschatological transformation invests human work with ultimate significance. Through it human beings contribute in their modest and broken way to God’s new creation.²⁵

For several reasons, it seems plausible to argue for the eschaton as the transformation of the world. First, the word used for the newness of the new creation means not newness “in time or origin” (neos) but newness “in nature or in quality” (kainos). Thus, the newness indicated in II Peter 3:13 and in Revelation 21:1 means “not the emergence of a cosmos totally other than the present one, but the creation of a universe which, though it has been renewed, stands in continuity with the present one.”²⁶ Second, Romans 8 depicts the liberation of the entire creation from the bondage to decay. God’s plan of redemption includes the deliverance of this world, rather than the replacement by the totally different world.²⁷ Third, the continuity of personhood between the body in the earthly life and the resurrected body indicates analogically that “the new earth will not be totally different from the present earth but will be the present earth wonderfully renewed.”²⁸ Fourth, the total destruction of the

²⁵ Volf, Work in the Spirit, 92.


²⁷ Hoekema, Bible and Future, 280.

²⁸ Hoekema, Bible and Future, 280-281.
present world at the eschaton would only prove that Satan succeeded to the extent that God can do nothing but annihilate the world. The annihilation of the present world in the end contradicts the basic biblical affirmation of the goodness of this world. Indeed, “the belief in the intrinsic goodness of creation is compatible only with the belief in the eschatological continuity.”

Fifth, several biblical passages indicate the continuity between creation and eschaton especially in their image of contribution of earthly wealth to the heavenly kingdom. For example, Isaiah envisions the glory of Zion: “Your gates will always stand open, they will never be shut, day or night, so that men may bring you the wealth of the nations—their kings led in triumphal procession” (60:11, NIV). The book of Revelation prophesies: “The nations will walk by its light, and the kings of the earth will bring their splendor into it” (21:24); “The glory and honor of the nations will be brought into it” (21:26).

For these reasons, eschaton as transformation of the world provides a viable alternative to the eschaton as total annihilation. One proponent of this continuity between the earthly life and the life to come is Abraham Kuyper. He contends that centuries of human life do not pass away meaninglessly. Rather, the development of human skills and abilities will have their significance not only in the present life, but also in the new earth. As Henry R. Van Til summarizes, “culture has an eternal future, with the resurrection that all that was interwoven with sin will perish,

---

29 Hoekema, *Bible and Future*, 281.
31 See also Volf, *Work in the Spirit*, 118, 120.
but that the germ, the substance and basic meaning, will be continued in the new earth.”

A contemporary restatement of this view can be found in Richard J. Mouw. In his exposition of Isaiah 60, he argues that the divine eschatological judgment “does not mean destruction but transformation.” He continues: “It is not the camels or the ships or the gold or the lumber that will be destroyed in the final conflict. Rather, it is the rebellious uses, the idolatrous functions, which seem under present conditions to be inextricably intertwined with these entities.” The eschaton will not destroy the fruits of the cultural development. It is their distorted functions and uses that will be cleansed and purified so that cultural fruits will contribute to the wealth of the heavenly kingdom. When God declared to “fill the earth and subdue it” (Gen 1:28), filling the earth indicated that the created world be filled with people’s interactions with nature and each other, establishment of orders in Eden, legislation for the management of the land, and taming nature into a social setting. This cultural mandate and the subsequent development of human culture will not become invalid in the Heavenly City.

There is an important sense in which the Holy City is the Garden-plus-the-“filling.” During the course of history sinful human beings have created a misdirected “filling.” The things they have added to the Garden are, contrary to the Creator’s intentions, perverse and idolatrous. But God still insists that the “filling” belongs to him. And he will reclaim it at the end time, in doing so transforming it into the kind of “filling” that he originally intended for his creation. This is why the “wealth” and the “glory” and the “honor” of the nations must be gathered in when the Day


34 Mouw, *When Kings Come Marching In*, 32.

35 Mouw, *When Kings Come Marching In*, 32.

of the Lord arrives. God’s ownership over the “filling” must be vindicated at the end of history.\(^{37}\)

In this alternative, vocation is not limited to the earthly life, but has significance in the heavenly kingdom.

In addition, the continuity between creation and eschaton does not necessarily undermine the doctrine of justification by grace through faith. On one hand, through the empowerment of the Holy Spirit, the regenerate works on earth for the coming kingdom as God’s coworkers. However, on the other hand, it is God alone who will bring out the consummation of the world.

It might seem contradictory both to affirm human contribution to the future new creation and to insist that new creation is a result of God’s action alone. The compatibility of both affirmations rests in the necessary distinction between God’s eschatological action \textit{in} history and his eschatological action \textit{at the end} of history. Through the Spirit, God is already working in history, using human actions to create provisional states of affairs that anticipate the new creation in a real way. These historical anticipations are, however, as far from the consummation of the new creation as earth is from heaven. The consummation is a work of God alone. But since this solitary divine work does not obliterate but transforms the historical anticipations of the new creation human beings have participated in, one can say, without being involved in a contradiction, that human work is an aspect of active anticipation of the exclusively divine \textit{transformatio mundi}.\(^{38}\)

The fruits of human work do not directly constitute the heavenly kingdom. God is the only one who will bring forth the heavenly kingdom. Nonetheless, God will effect this consummation in a way that the accumulation of human work on earth is not abolished but rather used through eschatological cleansing and purification. The calculation of human work in the justification of a human being, which

\(^{37}\) Mouw, \textit{When Kings Come Marching In}, 37.

\(^{38}\) Volf, \textit{Work in the Spirit}, 100.
Stromata 54 A

ciauses Luther so much concern, does not take place in this framework.

**Conclusion**

Vocation can still have significance in the coming kingdom by offering its fruits for the divine eschatological transformation. The fruits of human work on earth need to be judged and purified at the eschaton; nevertheless, vocation, when it is conducted with eschatological vision in mind, can connect creation and eschaton by prefiguring the eschatological completion of the welfare of the whole world (*shalom*). In this eschatological context, vocation gives more impetus to reform society, including working conditions. However fragmentary it may be, vocation on earth can be an anticipation and prefiguration of justice and love in the heavenly kingdom.