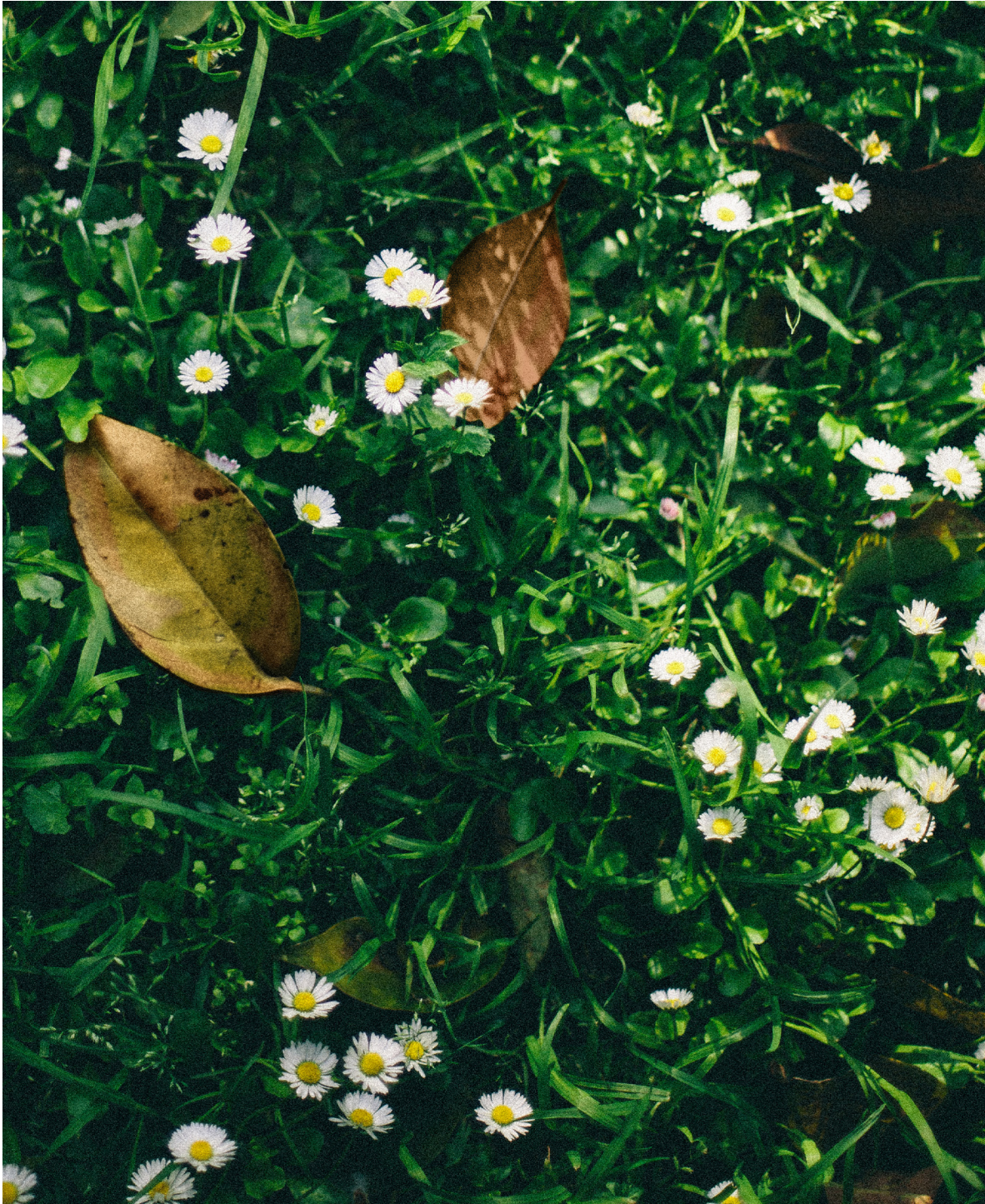
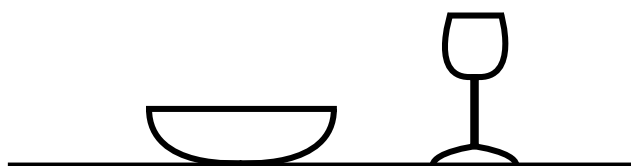


THE COMMON TABLE



ISSUE 4



# THE COMMON TABLE

COVENANT THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY STUDENT MAGAZINE

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Jake Gee

*The views in this magazine do not necessarily reflect the views of Covenant Theological Seminary.*

# Fall 2021

# Welcome

*"Blessed be the name of God forever and ever, to whom belong wisdom and might. He changes times and seasons; he removes kings and sets up kings; he gives wisdom to the wise and knowledge to those who have understanding."*

*Daniel 2:20-21*

## LETTER FROM THE EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

Israel Kolade opened his last letter as the editor in chief of The Common Table by quoting William Vanderbloemen: "Every leader is an interim leader." Over the past several months, the student magazine's leadership team has undergone many changes—two of our members leaving, my transition into Israel's role, and two new members joining. These changes remind us of the transient nature of our work. We are temporary.

Transience is something I'm very familiar with. I make my living as a web designer and developer. The fact that websites become outdated and regularly need to be updated is what pays my bills. Everything I create will last for a few years, at best, before something newer and shinier replaces it. There is a kind of change that erases.

One of the things I find most beautiful about ministry is the opportunity for a different kind of change—a change that deepens faith, brings growth, and takes people further into the mystery of an infinite God. Though ministry brings seasons of feeling insignificant or discouraged that cause us to question the value of our work, the truth is that relationships hold incredible potential for long-term impact, and we know with

certainty that the Word of God never returns void. The work of ministry brings change that lasts.

As we all walk through the changes God has given us, the student magazine team wanted to use this issue to think about change more specifically. Not all of the content fits that theme, but a good deal of it wrestles with the changes we face as humans in a broken world and even with the meaning of change. Our Managing Editor, Brendan DeJong, brings part two of his presidential interviews, highlighting Rev. Dr. Tom Gibbs' new installation as president of Covenant Seminary. There are articles on changes in our culture and poems processing how the changes around us effect our souls. All are student voices speaking from a season of life that is transient, but also profoundly formative. May their words minister to you amid the changes impacting your life, drawing you closer to our unchanging God.

We invite you to write to the editor in chief of The Common Table at [covstudentmagazine@gmail.com](mailto:covstudentmagazine@gmail.com) with your thoughts and reflections in response to the contributions contained in this issue.

Mary Schieferstein, MDiv '23

*Mary Schieferstein*  
Editor-in-Chief

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From left to right: Rachel Vining, Brendan DeJong, David Augustine, Mary Schieferstein, Bailey Preib

## Magazine Staff / *New Members*

David Augustine  
Newtown, PA  
MDiv, Spring '22

*Favorite book of the Bible?*

Proverbs – with a great simplicity of words Proverbs keenly observes and teaches about the practical outpouring of our hearts, giving us direction in a misty world.

*What are some things on your bucket list?*

Travel to all of the national parks and run a marathon.

Rachel Vining  
Tryon, NC  
MDiv + MAC, Spring '24

*Favorite book of the Bible?*

Jude - It has so much depth in such a small book and feels relevant to the times as the church constantly defends the one true faith. Jude portrays a holistic theology connecting much of the OT with the NT.

*What are some things on your bucket list?*

To become best friends with Taylor Swift and create some of the best wine in the world.

# The Study Table

## A GENERATIONAL VISION FOR CHANGE

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Austin Hess

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**C**ONSIDER FOR A MOMENT this quote by Milfred Minatrea in his work *Shaped by God's Heart: The Passion and Practices of Missional Churches* as he evaluates a church's mission program:

They believe the Kingdom that accomplished inner transformation in disciples will result in external transformation of the world. Their commitment is to be an instrument through which God can turn the world upside down. They expect to change the world.

Now for comparison see what a contemporary—Stephen E. Witmer—says in *A Big Gospel in Small Places: Why Ministry in Forgotten Communities Matters*:

[A] call to a small, unstrategic place is actually the most strategic way of reaching that particular place. The best way to reach [a small place] with the gospel is to live and minister for a long time in [there ...]. They're not going to change the world any more than I am. But the logic of the gospel is that God was willing to give his own Son for them.

While these two quotes do not represent all varying views on impact, scale, and change, I do believe that they represent two major views: one focuses on the immediate, large-scale impact of change while the other looks for the enduring, small impact of change. Neither of these perspectives are wrong. In fact, living in the tension between the two is important for balancing expectations.

Our contemporary culture closely observes change. We develop metrics and gather data to evaluate whether our business strategy is going to grow our

bookstore by 100% in the next five years. We develop assessments to gauge whether a student grew spiritually during their time as an undergraduate or graduate student. These types of evaluations and assessments are good and noteworthy as they ensure sooner, rather than later, that we are using time and resources in the best way possible.

However, my contention with sole reliance on these immediate feedback loops is that they do not give us a generational vision for change. What if one's impact as a bookstore owner has less to do with business growth, important as that may be, and more to do with relational impact over a long period of time? What if our metric for change also included the small moments, like when you handed a young student his first theology book which would instill a love of God's Word that would endure for years to come? What if the formation of students looked less at how much a student grew in their academic ability, and more at their continuing ability to grow spiritually, discipling others along the way?

While I believe that evaluating the immediate impact of change is good, what we need more today is a long view—a generational view—of change. One that looks less to the here-and-now, and one that looks more to the future where God's kingdom is established here on this earth. I will argue this position by exploring God's sovereignty in our giftings, location, our mortality, and his enduring kingdom.

**1. God has given us gifts to us for his church and world.**

Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 12:4-7 (ESV), "Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; and there are varieties of service, but the same Lord; and there

are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who empowers them all in everyone. To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good.” God has equipped each of his people uniquely to meet life’s challenges and to serve him and neighbor. We should be content in this regard: God will call us to meet specific challenges with our specific skills in order to establish his kingdom on this earth by bringing the gospel to all.

***2. God is sovereign and has placed us in a specific place among a specific people.***

If we believe God is sovereign over all things, including our gifts and abilities, then we must believe that he places us among a specific people in a particular area—wherever we may be sitting and reading this article, wherever we may live. Therefore, we should be content with our location. If we reside in a large city, we should seek its flourishing. If we reside in a small town, we should seek its flourishing. We may not know why we currently live at a specific latitude and longitude, but we are called to be faithful in our place, pouring into our community and those around us. God has positioned us in a specific place, he has called us to minister to his people right where we are and be a light of the gospel to those who need it.

***3. We do not live forever; God’s kingdom endures forever.***

We will all die; we are not able to escape this reality and we are continually reminded of it. Even if we are the most renowned or the least known, we all die. While exploring ways to maximize one’s impact in this life is

worthwhile, it is also fleeting. By the time most of us reach a national (or even global) influential status, we’re over halfway through our life and our health wanes drastically. However, God’s kingdom does not exhaust easily and is eternal. By re-shifting our focus from us—who will die—to God’s kingdom—which will endure forever—we can properly pace ourselves and refocus our sphere of influence. We can be more realistic about the change we can bring in this life and seek to spread the gospel to those around us.

In the meantime, what are we to do with our gifts in our specific places when we will not live forever? We are called to invest ourselves and our gifts into others. This call is not easy, for we want to see the fruit of our work now; we want to see God’s promises of renewal now. However, we should look to our forefathers for perseverance: “These all died in faith, not having received the things promised, but having seen them and greeted them from afar, and having acknowledged that they were strangers and exiles on the earth” (Hebrews 11:13, ESV). God’s Word makes it clear that often the fruit of our labor and the impact and change it has in the lives of others may not be realized in our time. However, in God’s economy, the change that he started through you will be cultivated and persevered: “And I am sure of this, that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ” (Philippians 1:6, ESV).

May God, who is constant in the midst of change and endures through all ages, establish in us perseverance to disciple others, as we expectantly await our reward in the life to come. —

# BLESSED ARE THOSE WHO MOURN: AN OPEN LETTER TO THE DISHEARTENED

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Alexander B. Cain

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**R**ECENTLY, AN ARTICLE was published by *Baptist News Global* which strongly criticized John Piper.<sup>1</sup> The author offers critiques regarding Piper's counsel for a woman in an abusive relationship, his stance on women praying and reading scripture in a worship service, Christian Hedonism, Piper's view of providence, and his latest support of Jonathan Edwards in light of his owning slaves.<sup>2</sup> Each one of these topics is worthy of a conversation or ten, but I do not wish to focus on any of them here. Instead, using the article as a springboard, I want to offer a reflection, not on the article per se, but on the larger context.

There is a change taking place in American Evangelicalism. It may be happening slowly (or perhaps you think it's happening quickly), but it is occurring nonetheless. There is a growing disappointment and disillusionment with evangelical leaders among Christians. We are growing weary of hearing about and being recipients of the misuse and abuse of power, and yet, we need to hear it. When I say that we are weary of hearing these things, you may scoff and think, "How can that be with *Christianity Today's* "The Rise and Fall of Mars Hill" podcast occupying the top ten list of Apple Podcasts?" But I would ask you to reflect on how you and others have felt after finishing your next episode or talking it over with a friend. My guess is that after these issues have been processed and expressed,

you've felt a measure of grief; and rightly so. How many more stories of coercion can we actually hear? How many reports from the *Houston Chronicle* can we read? How many brothers and sisters who have been the recipients of political maneuvering can we console before our hearts grow hard and bitter towards the faith handed down to us? Even so, the answer to these evils cannot be to tune it out; to move past it and get on with "what matters". Tuning it out for a season may be the appropriate and healthy response for those still working through their mistreatment, but it is not right for American Christians as a whole. We need to take a long, sincere look at what we've built, and, perhaps more importantly, we need to be honest about its formative power on us.

This is where the recent *Baptist News Global* article is helpful for us to consider. The author begins by telling his readers how a message from John Piper changed his "theological and ministerial trajectory forever".<sup>3</sup> He explains that he began to absorb teaching from Piper—in various forms—every day for years, and sounds excited, proud even, that Piper answered one of his questions on "Ask Pastor John."<sup>4</sup> He had found a spiritual father, as it were, from afar. Many of us have felt this way about Piper or others; I know that I have. Our eyes were opened to the glory and beauty of Jesus through their work, and no number of recorded sermons or panel discussions could satiate our hun-

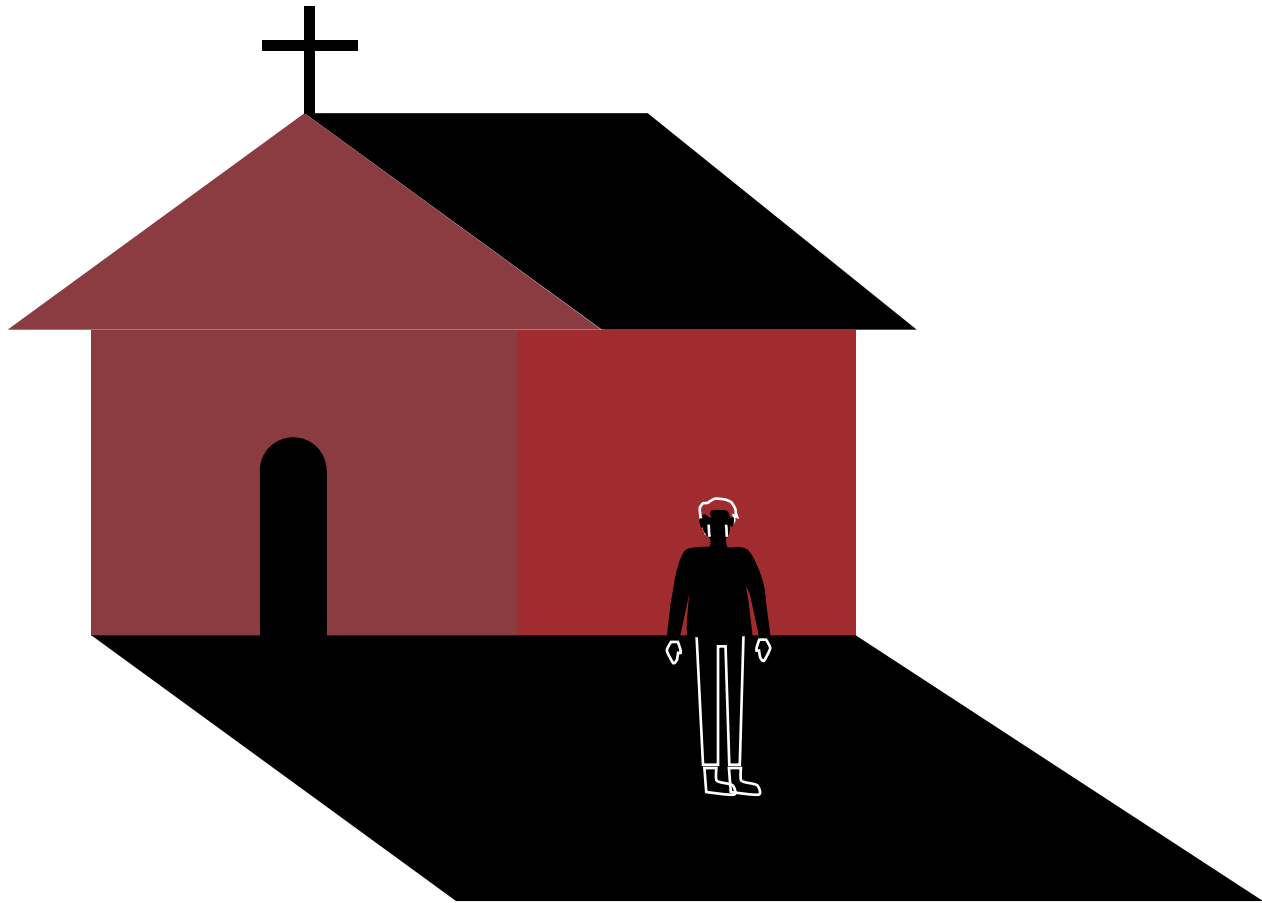
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<sup>1</sup> David Bumgardner, "It's time to pay the Piper," *Baptist News Global*, August 16, 2021, <https://baptistnews.com/article/its-time-to-pay-the-piper/#.YTjtR51Kjcs>.

<sup>2</sup> John Piper, "How Could Jonathan Edwards Own Slaves? Wrestling with the History of a Hero," *Desiring God*, August 10, 2021, <https://www.desiringgod.org/articles/how-could-jonathan-edwards-own-slaves>.

<sup>3</sup> Bumgardner, "It's time to pay the Piper."

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*



ger. We didn't just learn theology from these leaders, we learned how to think, how to hold ourselves in conversation, how to pray, and how to move through life trying to apply the gospel.

One such distant-mentor of mine was particularly encouraging. He opened the scriptures to me in a way that I had never before heard. Many of the pastors and theologians that I've listened to talked about the importance of being Christ-centered, but rarely modeled—with consistency—how to be exegetically faithful at the same time. It was as if they knew getting to Jesus and the gospel was of supreme importance but did so by taking Spurgeon's last-result advice of making a path "over hedge and ditch" more often than not.<sup>5</sup> But this pastor took the time to show how the passage pointed to Jesus in an irrefutable way so that you could be sure that this was what the Bible was teaching, not merely a homiletical approach based on a fad of "gospel centrality." What's more is that this individual did not appear to desire to build his own platform; he only spoke at conferences that were for pastors or seminarians. I corresponded with him via email on two occasions and

we even spent a day together in encouraging conversation that spanned over lunch and afternoon coffee.

Two years later, he was fired because he was sexually immoral. When I discovered his failing, I was hurt. For a short time, I couldn't understand why I felt betrayed. I told myself that it was silly, childish even, that I felt this way—that it was wrong for me to feel betrayed. He wasn't my pastor; I didn't really know him. I chided myself for placing him on a pedestal, and while that's problematic, it wasn't the sole reason for my grief. It's ok, good even, to look to leaders from whom we can learn. And when that learning comes in the vein of life guidance, it's natural to develop an affinity for that person. I needed friends to show me that truth. It allowed me to mourn what was truly lamentable, while making space for self-reflection.

Christians who have inhabited American Evangelicalism in some capacity or another need a twofold approach to engaging its failings: mournfulness and honesty, with each being both personal and communal. We must address those elements of harm in evangelicalism while mourning the damage it's done. Honest

<sup>5</sup> Charles Spurgeon, *The Soul Winer* (1963; repr., Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1974), 106–107.

criticism without mournfulness too easily veers towards self-righteousness and bitterness. Mournfulness without honesty lacks movement towards progress and fosters a safe place for narcissists. Only together is the way of Jesus modeled.<sup>6</sup>

When we encounter reprehensible teaching or actions from those whom we've looked to for guidance, we should mourn. Jesus has called leaders for the church's health, protection, and growth; all with the goal of the church building itself up in love.<sup>7</sup> Teachings and actions which violate these intentions are lamentable. And when it comes from those who have been an immense blessing to us and others, it hurts all the more deeply. This is the "personal" aspect to our mourning. It is right and good for us to mourn such things. Right, because these actions deviate from the person and work of Jesus. And good, because mourning is evidence that we're not being deceived, "tossed to and fro by the waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by human cunning, [or] by craftiness in deceitful schemes".<sup>8</sup> It's helpful for our mourning to be "communal" as well. By this, I mean that when we publicly express our necessary critiques, we must express them with a spirit of mournfulness. Otherwise, we run the risk of communicating a self-righteous approach towards such matters. We shouldn't take joy in exposing the faults in others, however necessary it is to do so.

This tension—offering necessary critiques yet being mournful—reminds me of a scene from *I Am Legend* (spoilers ahead). In this movie, Will Smith plays Robert Neville, presumably the sole survivor of a global pandemic that has turned many into vampiric monsters. His only companion is a dog he's raised from a puppy, Samantha, who is the last connection to his deceased daughter, Marley. While defending Robert, Samantha gets bitten by infected dogs and contracts the virus. After racing Samantha back to his lab, Robert administers the latest version of his attempted cure, but she

continues to show signs of the virus's progression. In a heart-wrenching scene, Robert must put Samantha down with his bare hands because, in her corrupted state, she turns on him. Though completely necessary, there is a mournfulness in the act. It's a poignant picture of how our engagement with corruption in evangelicalism should look. But make no mistake, mourning does not convey sympathy for the perpetrator, but rather for the lost element of blessing and goodness that has been corrupted. We mourn the terrorist attacks of 9/11 and January 6th, not because we have an affinity for terrorists, but because of the lives lost and the corruption of the perpetrators themselves. What

terrible things must happen to a human being to convince them to fly a plane into a building or storm the U.S. Capitol? Even so, communicating a mournfulness risks communicating a sympathy that threatens to mitigate the very corruption being mourned. For this reason, a twofold honesty is needed as well.

## “How many more stories of coercion can we actually hear?”

A cancer has multiplied in American Evangelicalism, and we need communal honesty to address it. I do not want to mince words: counseling a woman to stay in an abusive relationship and to even endure being smacked once is abhorrent. Any theology, whether it's one's view of submission or "for the greater good" of a potential salvation, which leads us to believe such things is corrupted and should be named as such. Communal honesty does not turn a blind eye to corruption. It doesn't say, "But look at the fruit." Communal honesty does not see harm as a dilemma to be solved in private meetings or a PR problem to be spun. Nor does it try to nuance unhelpful perspectives for the sake of reputation. Communal honesty is the truth plainly spoken. It's Nathan declaring to David, "You are the man!"<sup>9</sup> It's Paul opposing Cephas in Galatia.<sup>10</sup> It's Jesus proclaiming the seven woes to the Pharisees.<sup>11</sup> And nowhere are we told that any of these men got a kick out of telling the truth. Indeed, Jesus ends his pronouncement of woes by mourning over Jerusalem!<sup>12</sup> Communal honesty is speaking the truth in love; it's

<sup>6</sup> Matthew 23, ESV.

<sup>7</sup> Ephesians 4:16.

<sup>8</sup> Ephesians 4:14.

<sup>9</sup> 2 Samuel 12:7.

<sup>10</sup> Galatians 2:11.

<sup>11</sup> Matthew 23.

<sup>12</sup> I am grateful to D.A. Carson for pointing out this combination in *Jesus' Sermon on the mount: and His confrontation with the world: an exposition of Matthew 5-10* (Toronto, Ontario: Global Christian Publishers, 1999), 19.

cutting out the cancer without replacing it with an autoimmune disease; it's the way of Jesus from whom grace and truth has come.<sup>13</sup> It is also the Apostle John telling us that "If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us".<sup>14</sup> So it is not enough to be communally honest alone. We must also have personal honesty.

If we are to tell the truth, we must tell the whole truth. The whole truth is not merely communal honesty about others, but also personal honesty about ourselves. It is disingenuous for those of us who have been a part of evangelicalism to offer critiques as if we're outsiders, above it all, and have an "objective" take on the issues. Older Christians helped build and shape the institutions of American Evangelicalism, and younger Christians have been formed to one degree or another by those institutions. It is dishonest for older Christians to distance themselves from what has mutated on their watch, and it is equally dishonest for young Christians to deny that they have been formed by the culture and teachings of American Evangelicalism. After all, that is precisely the point of American Evangelicalism. Whether through catechisms, discipleship materials, or the perennial podcasts, YouTube videos, and articles produced all designed to help us learn how to think about and interact with the world around us, we have all been ingesting these materials for years. And as the adage says, you are what you eat. But I think we all know this already.

This, perhaps, is why we critique so harshly: because we've been influenced so deeply. We want to distance ourselves as much as possible from what is so harmful. We don't want it to be true of us. We're afraid that it's *in* us, in the same way that a young father is terrified he'll repeat the sins of his father. So we use strong, vitriolic language to critique what we know to be wrong. We're declaring to ourselves as much as to others that we're not like *that*. But this plays into the militant culture in which we've been living. It's the same game, we're just on a different team. But Jesus calls us to a different game altogether. He tells us the truth about ourselves and then washes us clean. He invites us to plainly speak the truth and mourn at the same time, to be angry and not sin.

We also critique harshly when we've been hurt deeply. Those that we've looked to for guidance—to follow

them as they follow Christ—have turned out to play the part of wolves in sheep's clothing. And it seems like everything we've known about Christianity starts falling apart. The palace walls have been stripped to reveal the garbage beneath. We've found ourselves on an unfamiliar road; one that is dark and confusing. But it is helpful to know that we are not the first Christians to walk this road. Our Black brothers and sisters are the forerunners to engaging with corrupted Christianity. Although Christianity had made its way to the continent of Africa long before the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade, many people forced into slavery were introduced to Christianity from their enslavers. They were given a truncated Bible stripped of any text that didn't favor the slavers and subjected to sermons justifying slavery and promoting obedience to their masters. Both before and following the abolition of slavery, Black people were forced to form their own churches, seminaries, and institutions because they were not welcomed as equal human beings in existing ones. And even now, our Black brothers and sisters are telling us how American Evangelicalism has led them to believe that the Black Church is deficient and should be left. In their accounts, they've modeled this two-fold mourning and honesty. If we would only listen, they have much to teach us about holding onto Jesus amid harm caused by Christians, which causes a poignant hurt.<sup>15</sup>

Jesus meets us there in that hurt as well. Towards the end of his life, he was abandoned in prayer by his three closest friends.<sup>16</sup> Another betrayed him to the corrupt, religious elite and in response he asked, "Would you betray me with a kiss?"<sup>17</sup> And Peter, who boldly declared that he would never abandon Jesus, strongly denied him with a curse.<sup>18</sup> Jesus knows what it is to mourn the loss and corruption of what is good. But he also promises that those who mourn shall be comforted.

Friends, if you've been harmed by American Evangelicalism, if you're disillusioned and disheartened, then Jesus invites you to mourn and be honest. Let all that is false be stripped away, and Jesus will remain to heal your wounds and bring comfort to your soul. —✝—

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<sup>13</sup> John 1:17.

<sup>14</sup> 1 John 1:8.

<sup>15</sup> Charlie Dates, "Why America needs the Black church for its own survival," *The Washington Post*, September 3, 2021, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/religion/2021/09/03/black-church-future-education/>.

<sup>16</sup> Matthew 26:43.

<sup>17</sup> Luke 22:48.

<sup>18</sup> Mark 14:71.

# THE DEATH OF FORGIVENESS

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Bailey Preib

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**WHEN YOU DIE**, what do you think people will remember you for? A steady, kind, and quiet life? A moment of great valor or horrible misjudgment? I have thought about this a lot lately: what defines a person? I'm not talking about identity, personhood, or even worth, which from a Christian perspective all comes from God. How do we, as fellow humans, think of each other on an interpersonal level?

I used to think only a few people were defined by one event. Norman Greenbaum is only remembered for "Spirit in the Sky." Usain Bolt is only remembered for being the fastest man alive. John Wilkes Booth is only remembered for killing Abraham Lincoln. Those moments are a mere few minutes, or even seconds. Yet, I couldn't tell you anything else about those people. I don't know how they treated their mothers, waiters, or peers. I don't know if they were religious, married, or well-educated. I don't know their dreams, hopes, or what kept them up at night.

Our current culture defines everyone by a moment now, whether you are famous or not. Actually, it's not by any moment, but specifically a bad moment: a lapse of judgment, an out of context comment, a sin committed as an adolescent. We call it cancel culture. Akin to canceling a subscription, cancel culture is a modern form of ostracism in which the person is removed from social or professional circles both in person and online for doing something viewed as wrong by the public. Cancel culture is the death of forgiveness.

I'm not defending these instances of wrongdoing as if they should be ignored, for they indeed are wrong to varying degrees. Anyone nowadays is liable to be canceled, particularly if you have social media. It's obvious when it happens to celebrities, but I have seen it happen to middle school girls, too. Should we really define someone's entire life by one of these bad moments? The complex truth is that humans cannot be labeled so easily. We do good deeds as well as bad. Everyone

has and everyone will. If you knew my sins, I bet you would cancel me. If someone knew your worst sins, would they cancel you too?

We've become a culture with logs in our eyes, unable to extend forgiveness despite our daily need for it ourselves. In this cultural moment, the biblical story of redemption and forgiveness should be its most compelling point.

Cancel culture stems from a distorted sense of justice. People are waking up to the atrocities committed for decades and demanding consequences. This is a Christian response. The Bible has entire books dedicated to justice: how to treat foreigners, animals, the land, orphans, widows, wives, etc. It also gives detailed guidance on how to respond to both unintentional and intentional wrongs: what to do when someone's animal accidentally kills a human, or how to repay someone for stealing. Many of the laws of the Bible are entirely concerned with the prevention of mistreatment or the proper justice due for a sinful act.

But where cancel culture stops, God goes further. In fact, it would be impossible for God to stop at justice, because the human race would cease to exist. And what kind of God creates just to annihilate? Yet, justice cannot be overlooked or dismissed. So Jesus came to be our consequence, to endure the necessary outcome of justice. And in doing so, we are forgiven. It is not by our acts, thoughts, remorse, or desire that we receive forgiveness. It is solely by grace.

And from this place we can move towards redemption and then restoration. This is even different from forgiveness, for forgiveness redeems backward to the point of violation. But restoration (or consummation) moves forward to something even greater than before the point of violation. Forgiveness is what allows restoration.

The story does not end in our cancellation. By receiving forgiveness we Christians should be all the more ready to extend forgiveness. We do this poorly.

This is an atrocity that demands change and one of which I am guilty.

What if the church is the only one who can fully ask for forgiveness because she is the only one who already has it? If you knew you were already forgiven before you asked, wouldn't that change everything? We could own our sins with tears streaming down our face publicly, not out of fear but out of the gift of grace and hope of consummation. It doesn't lessen the weight of our sins, or give us a green light to do whatever we want, since we know we will be forgiven. But the church could stop trying to hide her mistakes (there are far too many to do so anyways), and instead focus on apologizing, reconciliation, and change, which is far more biblical than acting perfect. To be forgiven admits that we have indeed committed grievous sins. To be forgiven means we are loved and can move forward knowing we will fail again. To be forgiven means my bad moment(s) is not what defines me.

A place that models forgiveness is a sanctuary in our current climate. In Luke 5:17-26 a paralytic comes to Jesus for healing. After seeing the man Jesus says, "Your sins are forgiven you." Of course, this caused a stir, to which Jesus replied, "Which is easier, to say, 'Your sins are forgiven you,' or to say, 'Rise and walk'? But that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins" - he said to the man who was paralyzed - "I say to you, rise, pick up your bed and go home." And the man did so, praising God.

Forgiveness and healing have an unbreakable bond. Instead of keeping people paralyzed in fear and shame, or isolated and ostracized, maybe we could help them pick up their mats. Maybe we could show them the stack of our own mats first. Maybe we could model what forgiveness looks like because we practice it daily, and in this small way, be a radical counter to cancel culture. —✚



# JESUS, THE IMMUTABLE MASTER OF CHANGE

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Eowyn Stoddard

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*"The Only Constant in Life Is Change."*

-Heraclitus

*"Heraclitus, I believe, says that all things pass and nothing stays, and comparing existing things to the flow of a river, he says you could not step twice into the same river."*

-Plato

According to this definition, by the time you've read these philosophers' quotes, you are, technically, no longer the same person you were before reading them. Some of the cells in your body have died and you have aged by approximately 15 seconds (yes, I timed how long it took me to read these lines). Because our lives are wrapped up in the fabric of time, change is the nature of the game. We cannot evade change; it's built into who we are. This is why it is so hard for us to live fully in the present, even though it's the only place we *can* live. Our existence is caught between past and future, wedged between conception and death. The minute we stop something, that action is already a thing of the past, and we can never be in the future, because if we were to enter it, we'd be in the present. Furthermore, because of the fall, things tend to change for the worse. The minute we were born, we began to die. Our bodies grow but also degenerate. Things break down around us. This conundrum at the center of our existence means we are creatures who often tend to one of two extremes: grieving or ignoring the past on the one hand, and fearing or daydreaming about the future on the other hand. Both of these tendencies make us miss out on the present.

## ***Grieving or ignoring the past***

If you are anything like me and have pleasant memories of the past, it's easy to want to capture those moments, idealizing them or mourning their loss because people and situations are no longer the same. My husband

has been digitizing our family videos of late. Watching them again has often brought tears to my eyes. I wanted so desperately to reach back into the past, to savor those precious moments when our children were young and naïve. In the videos were family members who are now no longer with us, happy celebrations where everything in the world felt right. In the face of the loss of loved ones or of some of my children's current struggles of life and faith, it's easy for me to idealize the past. But doing that doesn't help me deal with the present. It makes me grieve, but it doesn't give me solutions to help them now. I need to accept what is, without dwelling on the past. Sometimes, though, I prefer to ignore what happened in the past, or rewrite history to make it more palatable. I ignore the fact that raising five young children was exhausting, that it was often challenging me above my strength and wisdom. Back then I longed for life to be easier. What is it in your past that you idealize or would rather ignore? How is living in the past an impediment to living in the now?

## ***Fearing or daydreaming about the future***

The other extreme brought on by our human conundrum is daydreaming about the future. Instead of focusing on what's happening right now, we get lost in thoughts about what might be. We imagine different scenarios and believe everything will be better in the future. We wish we could speed up time to be in a better place. I dream of what it will be like when my kids are out of the house. How quiet and peaceful and stress-free it will be, ignoring the fact that life doesn't always get easier and that I'll probably miss the noise, the chaos and cooking for seven. But sometimes we are also paralyzed by the future. When our path is not clear, we get stuck in fear and start dreading what it is that God might call us to. What if I develop a debilitating disease? What if I never find work that is fulfilling and meaningful? What if my children never come back to the Lord? Those thoughts can keep us frozen in inaction. What does your daydreaming about the future reveal? A trust in God's goodness, or a fear that he won't be faithful to you? The good news for the Christian is that our current conundrum has been solved by someone who entered it but was not caught in it.

## ***Jesus mastered change***

Jesus, the eternal, unchanging one, entered into time and space. Let this mystery sink in a little. The immutable one *became* a man. He changed without changing in the incarnation. He became man without losing his deity. He changed without changing in the resurrection. He took on a new spiritual body without losing his human identity. He entered our human change conundrum from the outside. He inhabited and filled the small, impossible space captured between conception and death, past and future, and

cracked it open from the inside. In his divine nature, he had the ability to speak essential change into any situation. Think of the miracles. His ability to live in time and space, walking the roads of Galilee with his disciples displayed his humanity. The mystery of Jesus' two natures is what solves our human dilemma. But there was one particular event that changed *everything*. It happened on the day Jesus broke all the odds of entropy, rearranging his life particles into a resurrection body that was still his, but altogether changed. He united, in his person, past, present, and future, and gave us access to share in that already-not-yet reality through our union with him. He reversed the pattern of decay by dealing the deathblow to death itself. This new reality allows us to appreciate what Jesus did in the past and look forward to the future in hope.

### *In Him, we can remember the past*

The biblical worldview includes remembrance. We value what God has established in eternity past. Jesus was there before the creation of the world, outside of space and time. In him we were chosen before the foundation of the world. He was there at creation. He was there in the giving of the covenant. He was there in the law. He was there as the defender of Israel, he was there as the great high priest, he was there as the rock that followed the people in the desert. He was there when Israel erected *eben-ezers*, the stones that reminded the Israelites that God had helped them up until the present. He was there as the great leader of God's armies. He was there in the Glory presence in the tabernacle and temple. He was there as the Shepherd-King. The past belongs to him. In his incarnate life, Jesus entered the human experience and all its lows: hunger, cold, pain, loneliness, abandonment, and an abominable death we will never know. But he did it to transform it for us. At the core of our new identity in Christ, we don't have to be defined by the negative things in our past. Jesus is sovereign over what happened to us in the past and Jesus was there with us. We can grieve past things with hope because we know Jesus is renewing all things and nothing was ever out of his control to start out with.

### *In Him, we have hope for the future*

The biblical worldview also includes and hopes for real, eternal change in the future because of Jesus. He entered into that space between life and death, then,

through his resurrection, he entered into the future life that lies ahead of us. He's always a step ahead of us. He went on ahead as our forerunner, our captain, as the first fruits of God's harvest. The Christian's hope is alive because Jesus is! It's what the apostle Peter calls our "living hope." Because Jesus has gone to live in our eternal future, we can have real, transforming hope now. He is preparing an inheritance for us. The future belongs to him just as much as the past. He is forever the God-Man. Because we share in his death, we also share in his life and that life is eternal. It's mind-boggling for us, but that is what allows us to not fear or dread the future. Our hope is secure because it's anchored in Jesus. We can be assured that Jesus will be with us tomorrow just as he was with us yesterday. He will never leave us or forsake us as he promised his disciples when he left them to return to the Father's right hand.

### *In Him, we can live in the present*

So, what do we do in the here and now? He is calling us to live in the present, while remembering his past promises and trusting in his future ones. We can step out with confidence today knowing that God will take our present actions and cause them to bear future fruit. It's the walk of faith, fueled by the power of the Holy Spirit who is the guarantor of the age to come, already given

to us now! One day we will all be changed. But guess what? That change has already begun! He is making us more like Jesus even now, even as you are reading these lines. Whether you are reading this in bed at the end of a long day, he is with you. Or maybe you're taking a study break? He is with you. Or you're at the doctor's office awaiting test results. He is with you. His transforming presence with us changes

“When our path is not clear, we get stuck in fear and start dreading what it is that God might call us to.”

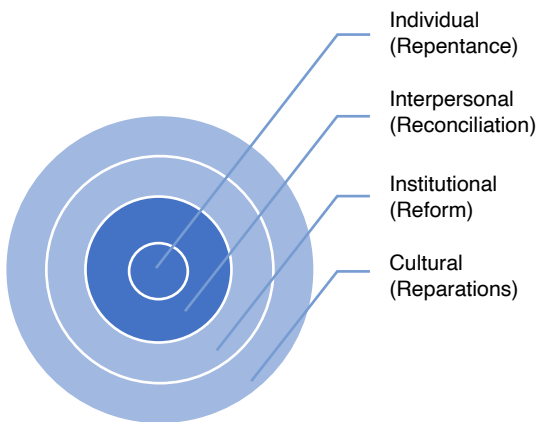
us. That is the kind of change we can embrace! So, are you a different person than you were five minutes ago, as Heraclitus might argue? Well, yes and no. On the one hand, no, because your past, present and future self is always made and loved by God. On the other hand, yes! Not because you've aged by five minutes, but because, hopefully, you've been reminded that Jesus is the sovereign One over all the changes that are happening in your life and that the Holy Spirit is at work in you changing you even now. Whether or not you can comprehend all the changes in your life, he was, is and will be with you. “And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age.” (Matthew 28:20) Therefore, go! →

# WHY DO WHITE CHRISTIANS HAVE A NARROW VIEW OF RACISM?

Lowell Taylor

**M**OST WHITE CHRISTIANS misunderstand racism. We understand racism to be an individual problem that requires repentance and an interpersonal problem that requires reconciliation; however, we do not understand it to be an institutional problem that requires reform or a cultural problem that requires reparations. Why?

## NARROW VIEW OF RACISM



I believe that white Christians—especially evangelicals—have a narrow view of racism because of dysfunctional white evangelical culture.

By culture I mean the behaviors, beliefs, and values that people have in common. By evangelical I mean Christians who believe in (1) the authority of the Bible, (2) the importance of a personal relationship with Jesus, and (3) the importance of sharing one's faith. By

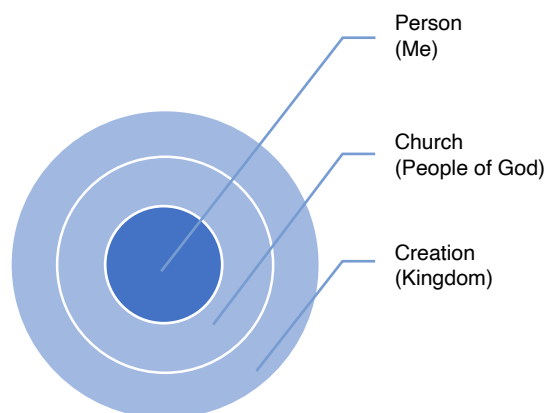
dysfunctional I mean that—in terms of understanding the problem of and solution to racism—white evangelical culture does not work—it divides the gospel and disables white evangelicals from doing justice.

I will make the following observations of white evangelical culture:

- White evangelical culture values individualism and is isolated from black people
- White evangelical culture believes a small gospel—emphasizing a personal relationship with Jesus and de-emphasizing systems
- White evangelical culture behaves unjustly—actively and passively supporting American institutions and culture characterized by white supremacy

*White evangelical culture values individualism and is isolated from black people*

## INDIVIDUALISTIC UNDERSTANDING OF PERSONS



In *Individualism and Biblical Personhood*, Williams writes that although the Bible understands people in terms of three concentric circles (the context of the church and creation), evangelicalism has a “highly individualistic understanding of persons.”

Williams comments on evangelical individualism:

“Much of what evangelicalism says is good and right. It properly stresses the individual’s need for salvation. And yes, we each have a personal relationship to the Lord. But a reduction of the full biblical reality takes place when this is all we say. At best it is only a partial truth. It sees the whole through the part, or the part as the whole, and as such it is exceedingly dangerous for how we understand ourselves, our relationship to God, and our relationship to the world about us. Evangelical individualism reflects a right insight gone wrong. The right insight is that individual people do matter within creation and within redemption. Personal faith is crucial. Yet we must contend that the individual is not all-important.”

In *Divided by Faith*, Emerson and Smith describe white Christian isolation from black people:

“Because about 90 percent of African Americans attend predominantly black congregations, at least 95 percent of white Americans—and probably higher—attend predominantly white churches.”

In *The End of White Christian America*, Jones confirms the findings of Emerson and Smith (see also *White Too Long* by Jones):

“In 2013, a PRRI [Public Religion Research Institute] survey uncovered the staggering levels of segregation within Americans’ personal lives. The survey asked Americans about their core social networks, defined

as up to seven people with whom they had discussed important matters in the last six months. The survey found that, on average, the core social networks of white Americans are a remarkable 91 percent white and only one percent black. Moreover, three quarters of white Americans have completely white core social networks. Among white evangelical and white mainline Protestants, these levels of homogeneity are even higher. Fully eight in ten white evangelical Protestants and 85 percent of white mainline Protestants have entirely white core social networks.”

Individualism and isolation have a significant impact on our beliefs and behavior.

***White evangelical culture believes a small gospel – emphasizing a personal relationship with Jesus and de-emphasizing systems***

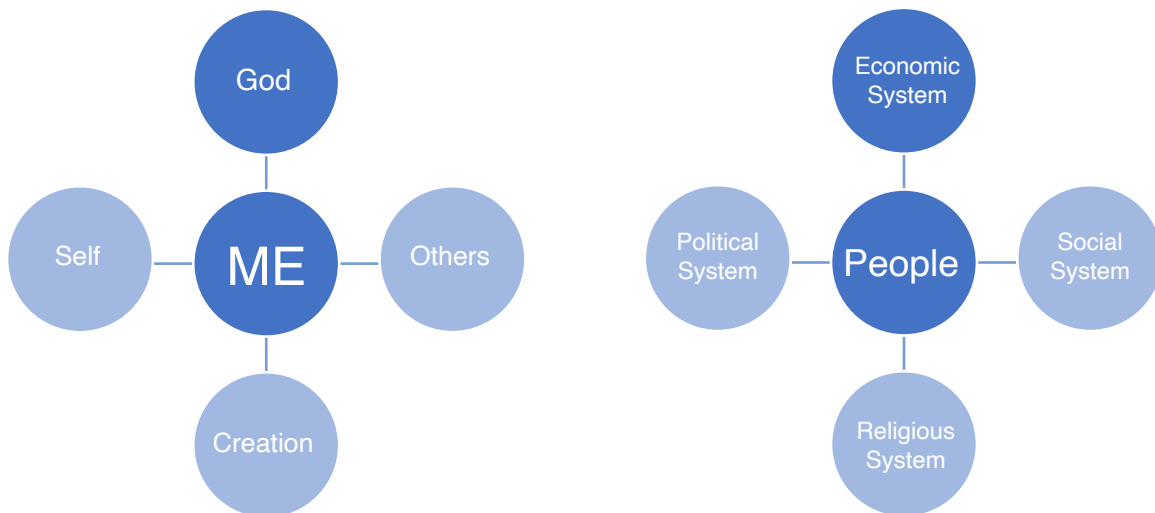
In *When Helping Hurts*, Corbett and Fikkert write that most evangelical Christians—when asked why Jesus came to earth—answer something like “to die on the cross to save us from sin so we can go to heaven.”

They write that this is a half-truth. A fuller truth is that God made man for relationships with God, self, others, and creation, and to make culture—expressed in economic, social, religious, and political systems (see Genesis 1-2). When Adam rebelled, sin cursed both relationships and systems (see Genesis 3). Jesus came to earth to make his blessing flow “far as the curse is found”—to preach the gospel of the kingdom of God (see Luke 4) and to renew all things—both broken people and broken systems (see Colossians 1).

In *Broken Systems, Broken People*, Fikkert writes:

“Nobody should better understand the comprehensive effects of the fall on both individuals and systems

### NARROW VIEW OF THE GOSPEL



better than Bible-believing Christians, because the Bible talks about this. Unfortunately, something has gone wrong in American Christianity. Researchers have found that if you ask Americans ‘Is poverty due to individual brokenness or systemic injustice?’ there’s one people group in all of the country that is the least likely to believe that systemic injustice is one of the causes of poverty. In their book *Divided by Faith*, Michael Emerson and Christian Smith find that white, Bible-believing Christians are the least likely group among all Americans to believe that systemic injustice is a cause of poverty. They suggest that this has to do with the individualism and piety that has often characterized American Christianity. We tend to reduce Christianity to a personal quiet time with God rather than a life-encompassing mission that seeks to bring His kingdom to bear on every square inch of the cosmos, including broken systems.”

Fikkert concludes that the white evangelical value of individualism has impacted our belief in the gospel. We have believed a small gospel—emphasizing a personal relationship with Jesus and de-emphasizing systems (see also *Rethinking Poverty Podcast: Potlucking with Jesus with Michael Rhodes*).

***White evangelical culture behaves unjustly—actively and passively supporting American institutions and culture characterized by white supremacy***

In *Divided by Faith*, Emerson and Smith write that when asked to explain the black / white socioeconomic gap, most white Christians cited the motivations of black people. When asked about solutions to racism, both white and black Christians agreed that getting to know people of another race is important; however, white Christians were less likely to agree that more structural solutions—like racially integrating churches or neighborhoods—are also important.

Emerson and Smith comment:

“Like their forebears during Jim Crow segregation, who prescribed kindness toward people of other races and getting to know people across races, but did not challenge the Jim Crow system, present day white evangelicals attempt to solve the race problem without shaking the foundations on which racialization is built. As long as they do not acknowledge the structures of racialization, they inadvertently contribute to them.”

What Emerson and Smith call “the white evangelical cultural toolkit” helps us understand why white evangelical culture behaves unjustly—actively and passively supporting American institutions and culture characterized by white supremacy:

“The racially important cultural tools in the white evangelical toolkit are ‘accountable freewill individualism,’

‘relationalism’ (attaching central importance to interpersonal relationships), and ‘antistructuralism’ (inability to perceive or unwillingness to accept social structural influences).”

Emerson and Smith comment on the limitations of white evangelical cultural tools:

“As carpenters are limited to building with the tools in their kit (hammers encourage the use of nails, drills encourage the use of screws), so white evangelicals are severely constrained by their religio-cultural tools. Although much in Christian scripture and tradition points to the influence of social structures on individuals, the stress on individualism has been so complete for such a long time in white American evangelical culture that such tools are nearly unavailable. What is more, white conservative Protestants believe that sinful humans typically deny their own personal sin by shifting blame somewhere else, such as on ‘the system.’ (Evangelicals are thus also antistructural because they believe that invoking social structures shifts guilt away from its root source—the accountable individual. However, evangelicals are selectively aware of social institutions—they see those that both impact them in their own social location and tend to undermine accountable freewill individualism. For instance, they are aware of affirmative action because such programs can impact them in their social locations, and they tend to oppose

## DYSFUNCTIONAL WHITE EVANGELICAL CULTURE

Values Individualism And Is Isolated From Black People



Believes Small Gospel—Emphasizes Personal Relationship With Jesus And De-Emphasizes Systems



Behaves Unjustly—Actively And Passively Supports American Institutions And Culture Characterized By White Supremacy

such programs because they go against evangelical understanding of accountable freewill individualism.)”

In summary: the white evangelical toolkit impacts our behavior: because white evangelical culture values individualism, it believes a small gospel and behaves unjustly.

“White Christians were less likely to agree that more structural solutions—like racially integrating churches or neighborhoods—are also important.”

*Conclusion: W.W.K.D.*

I wrote the first draft of this article the week before MLK Day. At that time it seemed fitting to ask W.W.K.D. (What Would King Do?). What he would say to white evangelicals like my friend who wrote:

“I’ll be honest, Lowell. I think you are creating more division rather than healing it. What you are proposing [reparations] would wreck our country and any hope for racial unity. Only the gospel can bring forgiveness, healing, and unity—not money.”

I find King’s *Letter from a Birmingham Jail*—written to white pastors—to be applicable to all of us, but especially to white evangelicals like my friend:

“In the midst of blatant injustices inflicted upon the Negro, I have watched white churches stand on the sideline and merely mouth pious irrelevancies and sanctimonious trivialities. In the midst of a mighty struggle to rid our nation of racial and economic injustice, I have heard so many ministers say, ‘Those are social issues with which the gospel has no real concern,’ and I have watched so many churches commit themselves to a completely otherworldly religion which made a strange distinction between body and soul, the sacred and the secular.”

May we not stand on the sidelines mouthing a small gospel. May our values, beliefs, and behavior be consistent with the gospel of the kingdom of God that renews all things—both broken people and broken systems. —

# PLEASE, STOP THIS TRAIN

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Doug Heen

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**I**N 2006 JOHN MAYER came out with a hit song titled “Stop This Train”. In this song Mayer uses the imagery of a moving train to describe the phenomenon humans feel when life changes quickly. He writes, “Stop this train/I want to get off and go back home again/I can’t take the speed it’s moving in/I know I can’t/But honestly, won’t someone stop this train?”<sup>1</sup>

I am currently in the middle of moving from St. Louis, MO, to Littleton, CO. I am completing my classes online while I transition to a new job with Deer Creek Church.<sup>2</sup> This move will be the tenth time that I have moved in my life. When I was a child, after we completed our third move, I asked my mom, “Can we stop moving? I don’t like it.” These days I am still asking that same question: ‘Can we stop moving?’

The problem is, the circumstances of life are continuously moving faster and faster. Life is constantly changing.

Circumstances continuously break patterns, alter events, and depart from the norm. Don’t get me wrong, I am overjoyed to be accepting a new job and moving to a beautiful location. That does not mean that I’m at peace or feel at home. The continuous movement of life breeds conflict and a sense of displacement. Most days, I feel like a vagabond, a drifter, or a nomad learning new norms and social cues.

John Mayer describes the sensation of ever-changing circumstances well when he writes, “I can’t take the speed it’s moving in.” Circumstances can move so fast that we often don’t have time to think about anything else, including the destination. The speed can become so overwhelming that we end up only seeing what’s in front of us. In turn, we can often become victims of our circumstances, caught in the stresses and frustrations of everyday life. In this thinking, we allow circumstances to dictate our thoughts, feelings, and relationships. Circumstances become more than fleeting moments

but overtake our whole being. Soon we find ourselves distressed because an email didn’t arrive when we had thought, or we turned in an assignment a day late. Should we allow circumstances to have this much control? How do we slow the train? Where is God?

When speaking about the ever-changing aspect of our world, you might have heard people say, ‘God is unchanging in our ever-changing world’. And he is; he is our rock in the storm, he is our shield in times of trouble, he is our mountain of refuge. God is constant. God should be the place we come back to time and time again, in the good and the bad. The people of God should, as the psalmist says, “Flee like a bird to your mountain.”<sup>3</sup> The people of God are described as this tiny bird finding refuge in this giant mountain. The mountain is where the bird can find rest, peace, shelter, protection, and consistency. We long for the mountain. We long for a place of harmony. We long for home.

Yet, despite God’s consistency and our longing for home, we don’t often flee to our refuge. We often manipulate and overpower our circumstances so that they bend to our will. We would rather weather the storm to look competent, confident, and in control than admit that we need help. The constant movement of life can become a means of proving to ourselves and others how impressive we are. Our response to change is often the attempt to control.

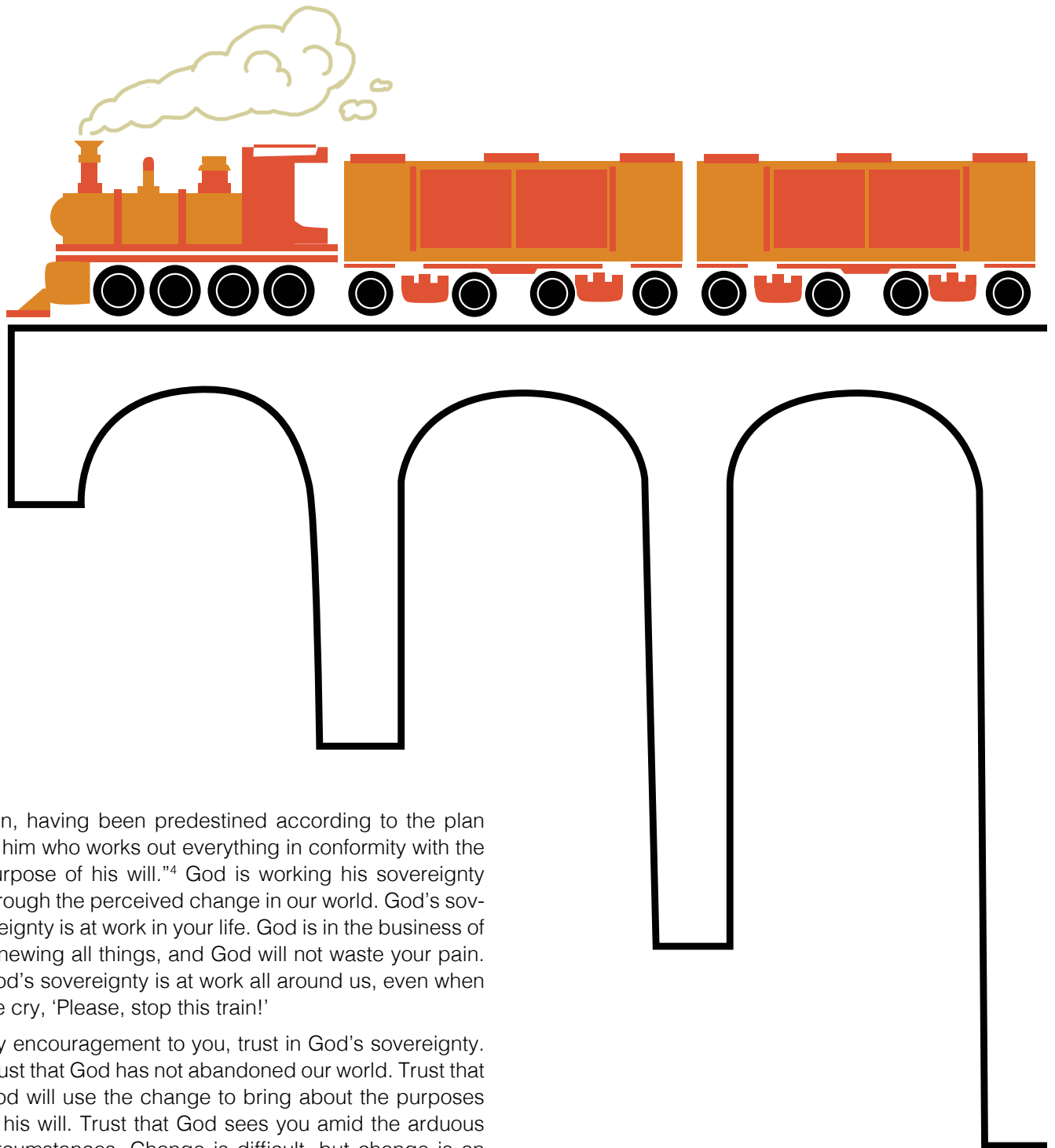
The bad news is that the train won’t stop moving. The good news is that God has laid the tracks for the train. As someone who has experienced more change than I ever expected or would wish upon anyone else, I can say, change can either be a formidable opponent or an opportunity to trust. Change can often feel like it is intended to break you, but I believe it is meant for your good. Change is not at odds with God laying the tracks. Change is not at odds with God’s sovereignty. Paul writes to the Ephesians, “In him we were also cho-

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<sup>1</sup> John Mayer, “Stop This Train.”

<sup>2</sup> <https://deercreekchurch.com/>

<sup>3</sup> Ps. 11:1 ESV



sen, having been predestined according to the plan of him who works out everything in conformity with the purpose of his will.”<sup>4</sup> God is working his sovereignty through the perceived change in our world. God’s sovereignty is at work in your life. God is in the business of renewing all things, and God will not waste your pain. God’s sovereignty is at work all around us, even when we cry, ‘Please, stop this train!’

My encouragement to you, trust in God’s sovereignty. Trust that God has not abandoned our world. Trust that God will use the change to bring about the purposes of his will. Trust that God sees you amid the arduous circumstances. Change is difficult, but change is an opportunity to trust. —

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<sup>4</sup> Eph. 1:11 ESV



# LIVING IN THE TIME-BETWEEN

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Brendan DeJong

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**A** **S WE ENTER** the season of Advent, I wanted to offer a reflection on the relevance of Advent and its various themes, many of which are frequently unexplored in Protestant circles. Often, Advent is viewed merely as a season of expectation in preparation for the birth of Christ, and while it is that, it is also so much more. In this short article, I'll be drawing on *Advent: The Once & Future Coming Of Jesus Christ* by Fleming Rutledge to name some of these unexplored themes. She writes, "Of all the seasons of the church year, Advent most closely mirrors the daily lives of Christians and of the church, asks the most important ethical questions, presents the most accurate picture of the human condition, and above all, orients us to the future of the God who will come again."<sup>1</sup> The reason that the season of Advent mirrors the church and its people is that we live in the tension of the time-between, the already and the not-yet.

The church is always in a position of waiting expectantly, a posture which the season of Advent embodies. The word "advent" comes from the Latin *adventus*, and means "beginning," or "important arrival." Rutledge points out that this sense of arrival has three layers: the incarnation of Christ, the presence of Christ in the sacraments, and the second coming

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<sup>1</sup> Fleming Rutledge, *Advent: The Once and Future Coming of Jesus Christ*, (William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, Grand Rapids: MI, 2018), 1.

of Christ.<sup>2</sup> As the church waits, she also testifies to Christ's second coming despite the present reality of darkness. Here is the tension: the battle is already won and sin is already defeated. Christ is coming in glory, yet human sin, brokenness, and death remain as vestiges of the devil's power.

Another theme is Advent's characterization of the human condition. The church celebrates Advent as the expectation of Christ's incarnation with the recognition that humanity, in its fallenness, cannot save itself. If the solution required by the problem of sin and corruption was God becoming man— God dying and rising again— then what does that tell us about the nature of the problem? We were categorically, comprehensively lost— “without hope and without God in the world”.<sup>3</sup> Our salvation was impossible, except for divine intervention. Advent highlights the depth of the human predicament.

The final theme I will mention here is Advent's orientation toward Christ's future return and judgment. The church expects and testifies not only to his return but also his ultimate victory and judgment of the living and the dead. Note that judgment is distinguished from condemnation. John 3:16 says Jesus did not come to condemn the world, but to save it. His judgment, which is to right all wrongs, is an expression of his

love, and it is perfect judgment because he is the perfectly righteous judge. By orienting us toward Christ's coming, Advent orients us toward his coming judgment and the renewal of all things.

In Protestant circles, Advent does not receive sufficient reflection that informs the evangelical church. How might Advent's under-explored themes inform our evangelism? Often, we hold the assumption that the more traditional our churches are, the less attractive they will be to other-than-Christian people. What if a deeper engagement with the church calendar served to draw more people in? Finally, how might Advent themes inform our response to contemporary questions and issues? We would do well to clarify and develop the ways in which Advent relates to our current ecclesiological moment, because it helps us contextualize the mission to which we are called as well as remember in whom our ultimate hope is placed. Rutledge writes:

In a very real sense, the Christian community lives in Advent all the time... The disappointment, brokenness, suffering, and pain that characterize life in this present world is held in dynamic tension with the promise of future glory that is yet to come. In that Advent tension, the church lives its life.<sup>4</sup> —

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<sup>2</sup> Rutledge, 5.

<sup>3</sup> Ephesians 2:12.

<sup>4</sup> Rutledge, 7.



# ON LUTHER'S DUALITIES

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Rafael Antonio Nieves-Rosario

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**D**URING THE REFORMATION, Martin Luther (1483 – 1546) brought a revival to the question of church and culture and thus shaped the theological landscape concerning the relationship between the two. Today, two schools of thought have dominated the debate around this question: the two kingdoms school which, variously construed, claims to follow in Luther's footsteps seeking to divorce church and culture; and the transformationalist school, which seeks to engage culture and reclaim it. The purpose of this research is twofold: (1) to put forward Luther's own two kingdoms thought, tracing both contemporary two kingdoms thought and transformationalist perspectives to a "common ancestor," and (2) to argue that the transformationalist perspective is a better fit to his thought. Historical contexts will not be discussed at large as they are beyond the scope of this work.

Martin Luther's perspective is aptly called "two kingdoms theology" as it presents three distinct dualities. Integral to his dualistic understanding are the distinctions between visibility and invisibility. The first duality corresponds to the twofold fabric of creation. This is the initial distinction between the "spiritual" (invisible) and the "earthly" (visible) realm, which correspond to humanity's dual composition. Robert C. Crouse, in his book *Two Kingdoms and Two Cities* expands Luther's first duality with these words,

What distinguishes these dual realms is primarily visibility and relationality. The spiritual realm involves the human person before God alone (*coram Deo*)—analogous to the soul or conscience, invisible to natural human sight. The earthly realm involves the human person in a network of relations and dependencies with other social creatures—analogous to the body, able to be seen in human perspective. All human per-

sons exist in both domains simultaneously and always; all human actions take place with reference to both domains.<sup>1</sup>

Thus, God created human nature to denote two distinct, but nevertheless related and overlapping, dimensions to life. Life lived in these two realms is an inescapable reality, as they belong to our created fabric. They are, therefore, noncompetitive – human beings are created with both a visible and an invisible composition.

Luther's second duality relates to how these two realms operate. Crouse explains, "Spiritual government is exercised invisibly by God alone in direct relationship with the human soul or conscience through the word. Earthly government is God's rule exercised visibly and indirectly through other human persons, targeted at the human body."<sup>2</sup> There are, therefore, two distinct ways in which they operate, but again, there is no reason to think that they must be unrelated. It is, after all, God's rule which is being enacted, either by God (in the spiritual realm) or mediated by humans (in the earthly realm).<sup>3</sup>

The third duality could be better understood as an antithesis that resulted from the fall. That is, after the intrusion of sin, there are two groups of people that can be identified, "the redeemed (identified with God's domain of salvation) and the lost (identified with Satan's domain of damnation)."<sup>4</sup> This antithesis is further explained in the giving of the protoevangelium in Genesis 3:15. In Luther's thought, it is in this post-fall condition that we have the inclusion of the law and grace dichotomy. Crouse expands, "although Luther notes some traces of the law/gospel distinction in pre-fall Eden, it is formally a post-fall reality. Since the fall, law and gospel are not primarily complementary, as in the visible/invisible distinction, but now antithetical."<sup>5</sup>

As we move to the assessment of the two different schools, I will outline Luther's dualities from the third to the first, as I think the effects and applications of the first one proves to be more controversial.

The third duality does not seem to pose any problems between the two schools of thought. They both recognize the problem of sin as creating two kinds of people: one identified with God and the other one with Satan. This distinction is precisely the essence of contemporary two kingdoms theology. Moreover, transformationalists also recognize it. John McClean explains, "in Kuyper's thought... the Christian and non-Christian operate from opposed worldviews: one based in love for God; the other in enmity to him."<sup>6</sup> In this sense, both accurately represent Luther's thought.

As it relates to the second duality, two kingdom proponents understand these two realms as the common kingdom and redemptive kingdom instituted by different covenants. David VanDrunen recognizes this distinction when he says,

God's people are thus called to live under both covenants – that is, in two kingdoms. On the one hand, they respect the terms of the Noahic covenant as they pursue a variety of cultural activities in common with unbelievers. On the other hand, they embrace the terms of the Abrahamic covenant of grace as they cling to the promises of salvation and eternal life in a new creation and as they gather in worshipping communities distinguished from the unbelieving world.<sup>7</sup>

Interestingly, transformationalists also affirm the distinction that arises from Luther's second duality, albeit from another perspective. Albert Wolters says, "there are two ways in which God imposes his law on the cosmos, two ways in which his will is done on earth as in heaven. He either does it directly, without mediation, or indirectly, through the involvement of human responsibility."<sup>8</sup> Kuyper also recognizes this distinction. He says, "creational and cultural life should be seen as having settled spheres in which each had a distinctive and God-given way of operating."<sup>9</sup> Moreover, "there are different spheres within creation, but God is sovereign over them all. These spheres should

<sup>1</sup> Robert C. Crouse, *Two Kingdoms and Two Cities: Mapping Theological Traditions of Church, Culture and Civil Order* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2017), 6.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> It is important to note that Luther uses the word "government" here to refer to the way God has deemed these realms to work. It may include political government, but it is not limited to it.

<sup>4</sup> Crouse, *Two Kingdoms and Two Cities*, 7.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 13.

<sup>6</sup> John McClean, "Neo-Calvinism versus Two-Kingdoms: An Eschatological Assessment," *The Reformed Theological Review* 76, no. 3 (December 2017): 175.

<sup>7</sup> David VanDrunen, *Living in God's Two Kingdoms: A Biblical Vision for Christianity and Culture* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2001), 29.

<sup>8</sup> Albert Wolters, *Creation Regained: Biblical Basis for a Reformational Worldview* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2005), loc. 203, Kindle.

<sup>9</sup> McClean, "Neo-Calvinism versus Two-Kingdoms," 176.

remain independent in their own sphere. No one sphere should encroach on another.”<sup>10</sup>

I believe the transformationalist approach more closely represents Luther. In VanDrunen’s thought, not only do the two kingdoms operate differently, but the believer himself operates differently within these two kingdoms. Nevertheless, that goes beyond Luther’s thought, since it is important to note that the paradigm of internal and external put forth in the second duality do not represent VanDrunen’s common and redemptive kingdom, but they are synonymous with Luther’s own duality: visible and invisible. On the other hand, the transformationalist perspective recognizes the distinctive ways in which the two realms operate without deviating from traditional covenantal thought, and without imposing a divorce on the life of the believer. The first duality presents this even more clearly, to which we now turn.

The first duality was about the twofold nature of reality—that there is a spiritual/invisible and earthly/visible fabric to reality. These natures are not only created and divine, but also related, overlapping, and noncompetitive. This means that, in concrete and practical terms, there should be a striving for coherence between the interior life of the believer (the one that deals with the person before God alone) and the exterior life of the believer (the one that deals with interpersonal relations and the social order). This brings us to a key distinction between contemporary two kingdoms theology and transformationalist thought: the engagement of the Christian believer in the wider culture.

Two kingdoms theology seeks to override this engagement by means of the paradigmatic work of Christ as the second Adam. VanDrunen says, “the first Adam did not bear God’s image in order to work aimlessly in the original creation but to finish his work in this world and then to enter a new creation and to sit down enthroned in royal rest.”<sup>11</sup> Moreover, “the resurrection now announces that Jesus, as the last Adam, has completed the task of the first Adam and has attained his reward of rest in the world-to-come.”<sup>12</sup> As an effect, two kingdom proponents argue that the Christian should not engage culture with the intention of transforming it (since to do so will substitute justification by faith alone)<sup>13</sup> but to passively participate in it as an extension of respect for the Noahic covenant.

In my view, the effects of VanDrunen’s two kingdoms

“While one needs to know the worthlessness of the old love, more positively that person needs to know the glory of the new love.”

theology yield a post-Enlightenment perspective on religious life, that is, a separation between the private religious life and the public secular life. The danger here is a subtle one: understanding the common and redemptive kingdom as unrelated will lead the believer to not see any connection between his life on Sunday and his life the rest of the week, which would ultimately go against Luther’s first duality. This duality does not refer to something merely “outside,” though it includes it, but to the composition and creational design of humanity.

But did Luther think that cultural activities of the Christian advance God’s kingdom? Granted, he did not. He believed that “those tasks are good and necessary, to be done according to God’s law and in a way pleasing to God. But they are not actions under the direct control of Christ as Redeemer or callings within his kingdom, which is inwardly spiritual.”<sup>14</sup> Nevertheless, Luther was also against the sacred/secular distinction of his day, whereby the work of the clergy was understood to be more spiritual and greater esteemed than the common believer’s. Luther’s particular understanding of two kingdoms theology sought to reverse this distinction by leveling the playing field.

Luther’s secularization of all life corresponds with the

<sup>10</sup> Steve Bishop, “Abraham Kuyper: Cultural Transformer,” no. 79 (Autumn 2020), accessed May 4, 2021, <http://www.affinity.org.uk/foundations-issues/issue-79-article-4-abraham-kuyper-cultural-transformer>.

<sup>11</sup> VanDrunen, *Living in God’s Two Kingdoms*, 40.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 139.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 21.

<sup>14</sup> Crouse, *Two Kingdoms and Two Cities*, 30.

transformationalist view in practical terms, as it brings coherence to every expression in life. This position says that “where God’s grace is discerned in the wider culture, Christians can and should act to reinforce and develop it, working with nonbelievers in education, politics, industry, agriculture or the arts.”<sup>15</sup> It is not the Christian’s activity furthering the kingdom that ultimately matters—they too believe that the realization of the kingdom is primarily God’s activity—nor is the transformationalist approach advocating for the substitution of justification by faith, but for the Christian’s engagement in culture as part of coherently and consistently living out his faith. This transformationalist perspective respects both Luther’s first duality and, in practical terms, his denial of the sacred/secular paradigm. Since, according to Luther, all human actions take place in both domains, transformationalism is at least a better fit in the way it seeks a correspondence between the visible and invisible expressions of the faith.

Luther’s three dualisms are the foundation for his two kingdoms thought. It is evident, then, not only that his two kingdoms conception is the foundation for both contemporary two kingdoms thought and transformationalist approach, but also that the transformationalist approach provides a better fit with Luther’s first duality on the basis of how it brings coherence to the believer’s internal and external life. Further, the transformationalist approach does not deviate from traditional covenantal thought, dogmatic Christology, or organic Ecclesiology. Transformationalism, then, proves to be a better fit to Luther’s thought than contemporary two kingdom thought. —

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<sup>15</sup> McClean, “Neo-Calvinism versus Two-Kingdoms,” 176.

# The Art Table

## Jesus the Body Drew Lattner

Toenails

Sun-hot hair for dry days uncovered,  
Hands smoothed over the decompressing  
heat of bedside walls,  
To yawn during a serious monologue.

Remembering to see what you've been looking at,  
Forgetting to remember what you've forgotten,  
Lifting your shoulders in jest,  
Smelling the wet grass  
As if mown inside your nostril.

Sitting on the ground unsupported,  
Noticing different types of breath,  
Picking grit out of the corners of an ear,  
A cold wind on a bracing morning,  
Being stronger than a jam jar.

The smaller noises inside your mouth,  
Losing track of time and emotion,  
Growing out of favorite shoes,  
Learning about another,  
Pain.

What is the body if not for Christ?



**C**amden and Tommy  
Brittney DeHart  
Digital Media

# More Perfect

David Augustine

“In order to form a more perfect.”  
This goal finding little fault in where we are,  
For the writers sat atop  
With me as their atop-sitting heir.

For my shoulders have not borne  
The imperfections of “perfect”  
Which lay between the lines  
Of who are “the people.”

Many have labored to give  
The “general welfare” I have,  
But enjoyed little themselves  
As “more perfect” sat smugly satisfied.  
But my voice is in those words.  
For in their seats,  
I could have sat.  
So my eyes should watch my tongue.

And perhaps my silence, not my speech,  
Can move us past “more perfect”  
So the ever-present voices who call “imperfect”  
Might be heard, not mine.



Photo by Jake Gee

## After the Rain

Mary Schieferstein

After the rain,  
I went to our special place

The river roared,  
Swallowing its banks

At the river bend,  
My favorite log was gone

The one where You  
Sat next to me and held me

You told me You loved me  
And that it was ok

I wonder if the river  
Carried our log away

After the rain,  
Nothing is ever the same

I tried to walk the path,  
But was forced to stop

My toes touched  
An impassable chasm of tree and sky

After the drowning,  
What was is gone

But, after the drowning,  
There is new beauty, new light

The forest floor flooded,  
Like heaven come down to earth

After the rain,  
I went to our special place

The world was different,  
But You were the same

# Stump, University City: A Letter To Myself

Brandon Crane

If you haven't yet,  
Take a breath.  
Take a look.  
Take inventory.

How has your  
life  
changed? Have you been uprooted, been cut  
down  
in any way? Has a part of you  
died?

If you haven't yet,  
I invite you to  
lament.

And don't think that you can honestly go on without it  
Don't think that you can lie to God and peer and self and  
pretend like everything is alright.  
Don't go on working and playing and studying if you can't feel  
your breath filling your body, or if you haven't thanked God  
for your life today, broken as it may be.  
Don't ignore that your deepest breath might bring an  
unexplainable weight along with it.  
Please don't forget to stop. To lament. To breathe.



Then,  
if you haven't yet,  
Take another.  
Take a look—maybe deeper, more curious, more patient this time.  
Maybe take a picture.  
Recording, reimagining, rethinking this time.

Maybe God can bring up a new kind of life  
from that towering tree of peace and perfection  
that you were growing, are growing, still want to grow.

Maybe God has already started.  
Maybe God is the only one who can truly make  
all things  
all right.

Maybe God wants you to take a look  
from an angle that  
you haven't yet,  
to get close,  
to get  
down  
on your knees, to get a lot more comfortable with the fact that  
the world might just glance at you and pass you by because, to  
them, your life is nothing more than the  
dead trunk of an old tree, the remains  
of a collapsed tower that  
can't provide  
any shade  
or beauty  
anymore.

Maybe God can meet your kneeling self and  
show you that He is in the business of  
renewing the old, lifeless, and unappealing.  
That this pattern, this cycle, this new growth,  
it's what He does, has done, will do.

Maybe God can use your kneeling self  
to tell you what He thinks of  
“perfection” and “success” as  
you tend to define them, or  
to help you taste and  
touch and smell and  
see and hear  
new life  
when you  
die.

Maybe  
God can use  
your kneeling  
self to remind you how  
He works whenever you're  
done showing Him how good your  
work is. Maybe you'll get used to  
dying, enjoy it, anticipate it, even.  
Maybe, if you haven't yet, kneel. And  
maybe, if He hasn't yet, He'll give new life.



Photo by Jake Gee

# THE TWILIGHT OF HUMANITY

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Anna Ochoa

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“**T**HEY DID NOT maintain their own principle, that is, the estate which God had given them...they were not satisfied with the status in which God had placed them, and desired something more.”<sup>1</sup>

I will admit this only for the purpose of this essay—I am reading the Twilight series. Mind you, by day, I tackle stacks of theology tomes for my MABTS degree; come night, one needs one’s fluff. I had long been curious to check out the great teenybopper fuss and was hoping for mindless entertainment. What I picked up as cerebral cotton candy, I instead found sticking to my teeth. As it turns out, the theology of my days and the

mythical creatures of my nights insist on endless debate. So much for teen fluff. Seminary has ruined me for uncritical consumption.

In this popular series, awkward teen falls for hot vampire and gives up her humanity to be with him forever. Though embraced by a wide audience, critiques of Stephenie Meyer’s saga abound including: protagonist Bella’s overdrawn clumsiness and blandness, her fast obsession with her new man (pardon me, *immortal creature of the night*); and, from former fans turned parents, a fresh unease with Edward’s creepy night peeps as Bella sleeps, and general lack of adult presence as teen makes irreversible choices. The theme

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<sup>1</sup> Herman Bavinck, *Our Reasonable Faith* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co, 1956), 222.

I found most unsettling, however, was more—to use my new seminary categories—ontological. Bella does not pine for the typical teen changes in body shape, boyfriends, or social status; she craves instead to alter her very existence. Eyes full of godlike Edward, Bella becomes consumed with the desire to trade up her lame humanity and transform into *vampyre*.

Edward warns her, naturally, that his cold and restless infinity is not one to wish for. Naturally, she ignores his protests. What downside? Comparing herself to her faster, stronger, richer, gifted, and blindingly fine vampire friends, she broils in a self-loathing no teen should have to face. High School is hard enough; thankfully, few of us at seventeen had any real shot with the stunning undead. She suffers a growing contempt for her fleshly weakness, her failure to bring anything to the superhuman brood beyond a penchant for breaking bones, needing regular rescue, and being a continual blood temptation to her forbearing boyfriend. She is desperate to shuffle off her mortal coil. Although Edward frets over the forfeit of her soul should she freely *choose* this monstrous exchange, she can no longer envision life without him. “I was ready to join his family and his world...the next time something came at us, I would be ready. An asset, not a liability.”<sup>2</sup> Bella’s humanity has become her greatest handicap to flourishing.

Young adult literature often deals with the growing pains of adulthood; but Bella’s agony springs from her growing disdain at being human at all. As her fictional peers confront social struggles by getting popular, getting perspective, or just getting through, Bella decides to just get out. Not merely mercenary, her “courageous” choice is clearly patterned on the modern value of pursuing True Love past any obstacle; but ultimately for Bella, it is the embodied life that is not worth living. As friends move on to college, careers, and children, Bella’s post-graduation plans are to get bit and join the plausibly damned.

Aside from this unnerving Faustian leap, and discouragingly low view of humanity, *Twilight* cleverly taps into the longing to exceed our frustrating limits and fly beyond this broken world. Who would not also grab at the chance to run like lightning, be breathlessly gorgeous and blissfully alive? But there are strings on this dream—Bella sacks her humanity at the risk of her soul; and unlike sacrificial superhero stories, she will likely become a predator, not a savior, of mankind. There is little virtue in her choice beyond sheer self-interest. Still, we can relate to her slamming the door on suffering, as we fester on in disease and futility, oppression

and death. In this way, oddly, vampiric life becomes a dim stand-in for renewal. (Indeed, after Edward agrees to transform her via venom, Bella refers to the change as her upcoming “renovations.”)<sup>3</sup> Yet with so much at stake, her choice cannot be the unqualified salute the series presents. Bella seizes past her station at immortal bliss, but it feels like a devil’s bargain.

I get it—this is fantasy, a genre that trades on the dream of transcending fleshly limits; and it is no crime to wish for heaven. Yet it is seminary, surprisingly, that has brought me back down to earth. Studying Scripture has restored to me the high value of our human embodiment and earthly post. As theologian Herman Bavinck expresses, “Man is the purpose and end, the head and crown of the whole work of creation...It is said of no other creatures, not even of the angels, that they were created in God’s image and that they exhibit His image.”<sup>4</sup> It is man’s sin, not his *humanity*, that corrupts the earth. The Bible agrees with Bella that fallen human life is painful; at the same time, it affirms our unbroken call to steward the earth, and marvelously promises the final restoration of all creation.

Tell Bella there is hope for human life—and this from an embodied Savior! The God of creation so loved humanity that he sent his own Son to be born of flesh, die for our sins, and rise again in an imperishable body. Jesus did not scorn being cloaked in human weakness, but willingly identified with us in order to raise us up with him forever. The great hope of the Resurrection is not a final trashing of the failed flesh project, but a transformation of his people into bodies that can withstand a glorious eternity in God’s presence. As Paul declares, “We will all be changed...in the twinkling of an eye” unto perfect, embodied joy forever. And it will be the Lamb of God, not seduction by vampire, that takes us there.<sup>5</sup> —E.I.

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<sup>2</sup> Stephenie Meyer, *Eclipse (The Twilight Saga Book 3)* (New York, NY: Hachette, 2007), 435, Kindle.

<sup>3</sup> Meyer, *Eclipse*, 440.

<sup>4</sup> Bavinck, *Our Reasonable Faith*, 184.

<sup>5</sup> I Cor. 15:51-52

# Ghost (The Last Time I Saw You)

Mary Schieferstein

You used to see me,  
Before the change.  
Now I'm caught between two places,  
Close yet far away.

I think it's my fault,  
I didn't want to go,  
But He asked and I answered.  
How could I say no?

The last time  
I saw you,  
You looked right through me,  
You looked right through me.  
I listened,  
I heard you,  
But you wouldn't hear me,  
You wouldn't hear me.  
Do I belong  
Anywhere anymore?  
The last time  
I saw you,  
I was a ghost  
Locked outside your door.

I think I'm bleeding.  
I feel the wound.  
No one knows how to mend me  
As well as you.

I think I'm screaming.  
Is it not enough  
For you to know that I need you,  
For help to come?

The last time  
I saw you,  
You looked right through me,  
You looked right through me.

I listened,  
I heard you,  
But you wouldn't hear me,  
You wouldn't hear me.  
Do I belong  
Anywhere anymore?  
The last time  
I saw you,  
I was a ghost  
Locked outside your door.

And I can see the world,  
The world that I once knew.  
The people all around me,  
Lives I'm no longer privy to.  
Alone on your front step,  
Mourning the home I used to have,  
No one to let me in.

The last time  
I saw you,  
You looked right through me,  
You looked right through me.  
I listened,  
I heard you,  
But you wouldn't hear me,  
You wouldn't hear me.  
Do I belong  
Anywhere anymore?  
The last time  
I saw you,  
I was a ghost  
Locked outside your door.

Do I belong  
Anywhere anymore?  
The last time  
I saw you,  
I was a ghost  
Locked outside your door.



Photo by Jake Gee, manipulation by Bailey Preib

## O Love of God, O God of Love (a Hymn) Paul Frederick

O Love of God, O God of Love:  
To thee we lift our praise;  
O Fountain vast in heav'n above:  
Each work thy love displays.

'Twas not for lack of company  
Thou made the world thine own:  
But from thy Love for us to see  
Abundance overflown.

For deep in thine dear Trinity,  
O Blessed Three in One:  
Behold we there sweet mystery:  
A Father loves a Son.

Thy love goes out to him alone:  
In fullness, not in part;  
On him is ev'ry love-beam shone  
Which shines out from thy heart.

For us, the wretched sinners, he  
Was hung 'neath darkened skies;  
For us thy love gave graciously  
Thy bosom's only prize.

In him thy love is spread abroad,  
And we our story tell:  
The life of everlasting God  
Now lives in us, as well.

# Moments

Bailey Preib

I caught myself gazing at you  
Like you must have done when I was first born  
Seeing the delicacy, the life  
In a way I suspect we were meant to see everyone  
Yet, die never doing so.  
I wiped that Holy tear  
Letting it baptize my cheek a moment  
While your monitor beeped and you awoke  
Telling me something as if you had not fallen asleep,  
Twice.  
And we both chose to play along.



Photo by Jake Gee, manipulation by Bailey Preib

# When Death Wears Life

David Augustine

Does it rip,  
Or does it tear?

Does it snap,  
Or does it smash?

Does it stab?  
Or does it pierce?

Fall or crush or crumble?

Kill or slay or slash?

Darkness destroy crush break rip  
Distort stain mark twist  
Death.

No other word

Death

The devil triumphs  
In stealing life and replacing it with death.

We were given a gift of beauty,  
But been clouded by corruption so pure  
That it tricks us with a beauty of falseness,  
And an allure built of death.

What should piece together life,  
Uniting perfectly in order to divide supremely,  
Its every touch now brings death  
With its every step corrupted.

Where the bride is now theft  
And the groom disregard.  
The flowers do not grow  
And the gazelles do not leap.

But winter reigns  
And scoughing rings.  
As Mothers weep, for their daughters are lost,  
And Fathers rage, for their sons are held captive

A brokenness unbreakable  
For the death is so pure.

The twist on beauty so perfect  
That death wears the face of life  
And life appears as chaf.

Unadulterated adultery

So that only perfect life  
Can cast out perfect death  
And only perfect love  
Can abolish a slavery to broken beauty.

# The Community Table

## STUDENT PROFILE: CAROLINE AGAN

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MDiv '25

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**Bailey Preib:** Thanks for meeting with me! You are a first year MDiv, and you have probably been asked this a million times, but how did God lead you to Covenant?

**Caroline Agan:** I've been in Covenant's community pretty much my whole life, because my dad went here and taught here.

**BP:** Who is your dad?

**CA:** (laughs) Jimmy Agan. I've always loved the campus and grew up running around in the woods behind the apartments, and sitting in on classes and going

to tea with Jerram with my mom. So I have always felt at home on campus, and felt a calling to seminary for the first time in high school. However, I was originally thinking of the counseling program. As I developed other skills in college (and realized I hated my psychology classes), I realized counseling was not the right path for me. Later on in college I saw academics and research and teaching as more of a place for me. Then it was really easy to see that Covenant would be a good place to get my MDiv.

**BP:** Do you have any ideas or goals for where your degree will lead you?

**CA:** The long-term hope is to get my PhD. I love doing research, writing, and teaching. If I could get paid to do those things, I would love to. I have a big imagination for what I could do, though. I could see myself in local ministry or student ministry again.

**BP:** If you could pick one thing you hope to gain at Covenant, that you would not want to graduate without, what would it be?

**CA:** Working for Reformed University Fellowship (RUF) the past two years exposed a lot of things I didn't know, which is probably true for any ministry position. There is no way to be totally prepared for the questions you will be asked or the situations you will be put in. But I already see how a lot of questions that were raised before my studies are already being answered. I hope I can have more confidence in my own abilities and how I respond to things.

**BP:** It sounds like an interest in apologetics?

**CA:** Yeah, and also having confidence that my methods are good. Sometimes, I feel like I'm too soft heart-

ed and have a lot of fear about speaking the truth. So learning when to be bold, and when to sit back and listen... but not feeling guilty when you need to sit back and listen as if I am somehow failing... I want that confidence and courage when to use certain tools and when to sit back. But besides that, I definitely want to know Greek, and Hebrew, and church history and all that. But I think applied theology, how to apply the gospel to the current culture we are living in, is what I am most psyched about.

**BP:** I am curious, being a female in the MDiv program, have you experienced anything unexpected or any kinds of stigmas?

**CA:** I usually have two kinds of conversations with people when I tell them I am getting the MDiv. It's either "Oh, are you getting ordained?" like me getting my MDiv makes them afraid for me. But it is an attitude that says I must be doing one certain thing with the degree. The second reaction, it is an instant excitement from people like, "Oh you are really doing it, you're going the full way and not just doing half." That actually



makes me more angry. I appreciate people wanting to honor the few women who are in that program, but I don't think that is a reason to look down on women in other seminary programs. I want to dignify both men and women in the counseling program and the other M.A. programs, because that is a whole different kind of hard work. And there is no less "doing it" in those degrees. I know those people mean it as an encouragement, but it's not how I hear it.

**BP:** I hate the "are you getting ordained" question. Because behind it is either "Oh you are going off the band wagon, headed down this slippery slope" or it's people who are maybe not as familiar with the PCA asking and I think, "Oh no, do I have to explain that women cannot be ordained in this denomination?"

**CA:** That was a question that came up a lot in California where I did my internship. It was a hot topic and it was hard to be in the middle of it and feeling misunderstood by everyone. I do want to be in ministry and people seem to imply that there is no way to be treated well in ministry unless you are ordained—which I hope isn't true. Or people saying women shouldn't desire ordination and that it is impossible to feel that call. Because I do think that women who get ordained are our sisters in Christ, listening to the leaders who help them interpret the Bible. They are trying to honor God as much as I am when I choose not to get ordained.

**BP:** I think anything that goes against societal expectations—the idea of submitting to something that maybe you don't fully agree with or don't understand—

sounds so foreign. I don't know everything and what I think is not the end-all be-all, or necessarily the right thing.

**CA:** This is the community that I am in, and I don't have to stay. I have the freedom to go! But I want to stay. I am going to work within the parameters already set up, and that doesn't mean never push back on anything, but I love and trust the people God has put in my life. And this is how I have been taught to interpret Scripture, I don't know any other way.

**BP:** Within the PCA, for me at least, is where I have experienced the most love. It's not a vacuum issue, it has to take into account all these things. My last question: Do you have any advice for fellow classmates or potential future students?

**CA:** Believe professors when they tell you that you don't have to get an A. Believe they really do want what's best for you and trust them when they say that. I think a second one would be to trust the curriculum. It isn't perfect, and I am not far into it either, but trust that there is a reason counseling students are in theology classes and theology students are in counseling classes. That interdisciplinary focus will sustain our ministry, and I don't know that because I have experienced it, but because a lot of wise people have told me that.

**BP:** That is some seriously good advice and things I wrestled with my first semester. Thank you for talking with me!

**CA:** Absolutely. —



# INTERVIEW WITH PRESIDENT DR. GIBBS

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Covenant Theological Seminary President, 2021–present

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In our spring 2021 issue of *The Common Table*, I had the privilege of sitting down and interviewing our outgoing president, Dr. Mark Dalbey, about his time at Covenant. I was equally thrilled this fall for the opportunity to interview our incoming president, Dr. Tom Gibbs. In this segment, we talk about what led him to and prepared him for the presidency at Covenant, his vision for Covenant, and college football.

**Brendan DeJong:** It's a pleasure to be with you. I want to start off by asking how the move from Texas has been for you and your family?

**Tom Gibbs:** In some ways it's been a homecoming, because I was here as a divinity student from 1994 to 1997 when Tara and I were newly married, so the beginning of our marriage was here in St. Louis. It's been a special place for us and it's been fun to come back and get reacquainted with the special places and culture here. But it's also been challenging—we

were in Texas for 24 years, we had all our children there, and they still call Texas home. Our youngest is a junior in high school, so it was challenging for her to transition high schools and leave the world she knew. She attends Westminster Christian Academy, which she enjoys, and she's made a good transition into our church's youth group. But also, it was a big announcement for the church that I led and planted for 19 years, so they're in the middle of a search of a new pastor at Redeemer Presbyterian Church. Overall, the transition has gone really well—in one sense, we were surprised that God led us in this way—it wasn't something we expected, but we've been able to see God's hand in it.

**BD:** There's always a sense of loss that comes with change.

**TG:** Yes, there's always a sense of loss, but also of expectancy, hope and excitement about the future here.



Dr. Dalbey and Dr. Gibbs

**BD:** So you mentioned pastoring a church for 19 years, and before that you did campus ministry at Baylor—you've been in campus ministry, church planting, pastoral work, overseen church planters—would you say you have a particular ministry passion?

**TG:** People always ask me which part of being a pastor I love the most. At heart I'm a generalist, so I love it all. I love all the things that pastors get to do. I love the preaching, the teaching, the shepherding, the counseling, I love the opportunity to lead and cast vision, I love being in those places where people need direction from the Lord. In short, I love being a servant and hopefully a steward of God's purpose in people's lives. I think if there's anything that I've seen God use me for over the course of my ministry and life, it has been in tackling tough situations. When we started [Baylor RUF] in Waco we didn't have a local PCA church there—that was an out-of-the-box idea that we would do it that way, and I'm not sure exactly how that got decided. But we said we were up for the challenge. When we went to San Antonio, that was largely an untouched city by the PCA, our desire to locate the plant in the center city made it an even more daunting task. But the challenge was exciting to me. To plant and stay there for 19 years required a lot of growth, internal change, and navigation of several complex challenges, so working through challenging ministry situations has always been part of my story.

**BD:** That leads into my next question: you mentioned you weren't necessarily expecting this kind of transition. How would you say has God uniquely prepared you and your family for this work at Covenant Seminary?

**TG:** Ever since the time we spent in St. Louis, I've loved Covenant Seminary. It really left a mark on me. I made relationships with professors whom I've stayed close to over the years, and I've always sensed that there's been a strong tie to the seminary. I also reconnected with the seminary through my doctoral studies, which I completed in 2015 just as Covenant was entering some of its most difficult waters. Much of my study's focus was related to leadership challenges in ministry, and so I was not only dealing with my own story in San Antonio, but I was also cognizant of some of the pressures that Covenant was facing as an institution. As I walked through my own story and God led Redeemer to greater and greater health, I realized that God had given me some gifts in this area. I found opportunities opening up to talk about leading and negotiating challenges in ministry, whether it was with church planters or sessions or people in the church—I just

kept having these opportunities. In our own church context we kept getting healthier and continued to grow, but I began to wonder whether the Lord had another role for me somewhere—not knowing if or where. When Covenant approached us, we took that as something that the Lord wanted us to consider. What was interesting about the process was that in 19 years, I had never entered a process because I had never felt like the Lord wanted us to consider leaving, even though there were a lot of opportunities to consider. So this was the first time I ever allowed myself to consider that God might be calling us somewhere else. As we entered into the process I began to see that my story and gifts aligned with the need at Covenant Seminary, and that in fact God may have a role for me at this moment in Covenant's history. I think that's what the committee became convinced of too.

**BD:** You've been in St. Louis for about three months—what's your experience been like so far as president?

**TG:** I think the things that make Covenant special are here and are as alive as ever—the passion of the professors to impact students and the legacy of biblical faithfulness on mission for the church. What I loved Covenant for as a student back in the 90s is still here. Some differences are that there are fewer students on campus compared to when I was here because we have the online program, so I'm still adjusting to that. I've loved getting to know the staff and working with them. The other big adjustment has been adjusting to a new rhythm. I'm familiar with the rhythm of pastoral ministry in a church for twenty years, which revolves around Sunday and the weekly preaching event. The rhythm of an academic institution is different, and I'm still sorting out what my rhythm will be.

**BD:** What kind of vision do you have for Covenant going forward?

**TG:** When I think about the future for Covenant I think of a future that's rooted in its past: what Covenant has been as the denominational seminary of the PCA. I want to train our students, regardless of what degree program they're in, to minister God's word, equip God's people, and walk in God's grace—all for God's mission. These are the things we already do at Covenant Seminary. What I want Covenant to grow in or enhance is to have more students come and participate in the divinity programs—the Masters of Divinity and Masters of Biblical and Theological Studies. Historically what Covenant did most was train pastors and I want to see us be renewed in that mission and that be a bigger part of what's happening here at Covenant. I think that will be in the interest of the denomination and the future of Covenant seminary. That's not to diminish the importance of the other programs—I also want them to continue to flourish as

they are—but I want us to be known as a training institution for pastors.

**BD:** Finally, any college football commitments?

**TG:** Yes! I went to Auburn, so I am an Auburn tiger. Now that my kids have all gone to different colleges, my oldest daughter is a Baylor Bear, my son's a Texas A&M Aggie, and I have a sophomore who's at the University of Arkansas, she's a Razorback, so all of those logos dot my car now too!

**BD:** Thank you so much for your time! →



The Gibbs family



# STUDENT PROFILE:

## Josué Pernillo

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MDiv '22

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**Brendan DeJong:** Hi Josué, tell me a bit about where you're from and your home church context.

**Josué Pernillo:** I was born in Guatemala, and there we went to a Christian church. Most Latin American countries are predominantly Catholic, but Guatemala was a closed country until the seventies when there was this massive earthquake, and that's when a lot of Protestant aid came and people started establishing churches, which grew a lot in the eighties and nineties. So most of my life I spent in an immigrant Guatemalan church. We moved from Guatemala to the south side of Chicago, and then I moved to Champagne, Illinois for college which is where I'm still located. Champagne is about three and a half hours from St. Louis. The transition to Covenant has been different since I've been a hybrid student—I'm on campus one week per se-

mester. When I'm here I eat a lot of Pappy's, so there's nothing to complain about. In terms of churches, I've been at multiethnic churches and American churches. Right now I'm in a mostly American church which is interesting. I'm still trying to learn and discern—it can be difficult to find your place in the church world, so I'm still praying and thinking through that.

**BD:** How did you end up at Covenant?

**JP:** I was already twenty-eight when I started seminary. When I was in college, I had a sense of calling to go into ministry, but I started working and gave myself time to pray and think through that sense of calling. I worked for the USDA and served in my local church, and throughout that time I knew I wanted to go to seminary. On their old website, Covenant had free classes that you could sign up for and download

so I went through like six or seven of those over two years and I just loved them. I would sit and listen to them while I worked, and even get the books from the 'suggested reading' list. What's funny now is I have so much reading to do for my classes that there's no time for the supplemental readings. So I was considering going to seminary full time but wanted to stay in my local church, so that I could serve and apply what I learned while I was learning it. I started looking at different online programs, and some of the pastors that I knew had gone to Covenant and they put in a good word. I thought about moving to St. Louis, but didn't think it was the right time. Coincidentally, that's when Covenant started the hybrid program, so the minute they opened that up I signed up. I remember I was coming back from a youth retreat and I was talking to admissions on my way back from Indiana for like three hours, and the call was super bad and kept cutting out, and I thought they would never let me in. But by the grace of God, I was accepted, and next thing you know I started classes.

**BD:** How has your Covenant experience been as an online student and as a minority?

**JP:** With online classes, it's just on you to do the work. My perception of what it's like at covenant residentially is that there is a lot of community support and a lot of people pushing you along. There is some support for online students, and I know Covenant tries hard to help us, but of course there are natural limitations that come with online learning. For all of last year, everybody was online, which was funny because everyone kept saying how hard it was to study online. Of course, all the online students know that already. There is a small part of me that regrets not attending residentially, but I also think I've learned a lot from the experience of trying to build relationships from a distance. Also, I have nothing but good things to say about the professors—even with everything that happened last year, they were so gracious and willing to meet over video, so I'm really thankful for them. Overall, being at Covenant has been really healing and strengthening, even if it's from a distance. Over time, the online students build camaraderie with each other—there's a couple hybrid people who I see for each of the in-person weeks, and you see what they post on the discussion boards. It's always good to see that they're doing well because they're all over the country in their specific churches. I remember taking Communicating the Scriptures, Preaching the New Testament, and then Preaching the Old Tes-

tament, so we got to be on that journey together which was really fun. It's been a really good experience and I'm really glad I came.

As a minority I think the main thing is navigating majority white culture. For example, the way that white people ask questions is different from the way Latinos would ask them. When a teacher asks, "Does anybody have any thoughts?" I don't—that's not how I was raised. In a highly collectivistic culture, I wasn't taught to have thoughts or criticisms about everything because we were taught that that's just not healthy. I realized when I'm in class, the way they measure engagement is confidence and the ability to share your opinion, so I find myself having to formulate opinions quickly. I'm more of an internal processor—class discussions and questions are geared more towards students who are external processors, but I need like a day and a half and then I'll maybe have a question.

The other thing about being a minority is that there's a fear that you're not being authentic because you have to match the environment in the way you communicate things. For example, even though I'm not always comfortable sharing my opinion or I don't have an opinion, because stating your opinion is the cultural expectation, I have to match that. Now, to an extent, that's okay, but the problem is if you do are constantly been asked to step out of your comfort zone, it begins to feel like you don't know who you are anymore. Then, even though the emphasis is knowing who you are, it doesn't feel like that at all. And I know everyone has experienced having to step out of their comfort zone but it's just the consistency of it that minorities experience is something to navigate at Covenant.

**BD:** Thank you, that's a really insightful and kind answer. You're in your final year—any idea of what's next for you?

**JP:** I want to take some time to reflect, but God willing, I'm looking to go into pastoral ministry. What I really want to do is walk with God's people and serve them. Based on the skills that I have and don't have, I think that's in pastoral ministry, either full time or bivocationally. That's still the dream that I felt like I had when I was in college, and it's still the dream now. I think it's a calling that has been tested, and even though in many ways I feel really unqualified and inadequate, at the same time I trust that God will provide what I need and that he will open doors.

**BD:** Thanks so much for your time! —BD

# Contributors

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*Thank you to each and every one of you who helped make this magazine possible!*



# THE COMMON TABLE

The vision of the Common Table is to see student voices amplified, student skills developed, and student life improved, for the purpose of promoting the common good of Covenant Theological Seminary. In order to see this vision realized, the Common Table will work to promote critical reflection and dialogue on faith, theology, culture, and life through the semi-annual publishing of an online and print magazine—all for God's mission.



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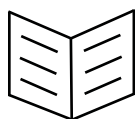
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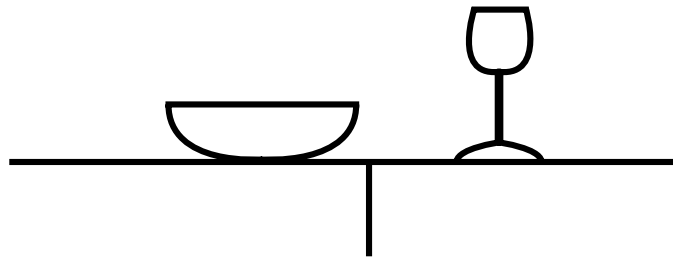


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*"Blessed be the name of God forever and ever, to whom belong wisdom and might. He changes times and seasons; he removes kings and sets up kings; he gives wisdom to the wise and knowledge to those who have understanding."*

*Daniel 2:20-21*