

BEING THE CHURCH IN OUR CULTURE

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Introduction

The relationship of Christians to culture is *the* current crisis point for the church. Evangelicals are deeply divided over how to relate to a social order growing increasingly post-Christian. **1)** Some advise re-emphasis on tradition and on 'letting the church be the church,' rejecting any direct attempt to influence society as a whole. **2)** Others are hostile to the culture but hopeful that they can change it through aggressive action, in large part political. **3)** Still others believe 'you change culture one heart at a time.' They see culture as basically neutral and look mainly for ways to bring more individuals to personal faith. **4)** Finally, many are attracted to the new culture and want to re-engineer the church to modify its adversarial relationship with it. Many in the 'one heart at a time' party play down doctrine and stress experience, while some in re-engineering group are changing many distinctives of evangelical doctrine the name of cultural engagement. That is fueling much theological controversy, but even people holding the very same doctrine are fighting over what to *do* with our doctrine to reach our culture. None of the strategies just listed should be abandoned. We need Christian tradition, Christians in politics, and effective evangelism. And the church has always 'contextualized' itself to a great degree into its surrounding culture. There are harmful excesses in every approach, however. I think that is because many have turned their specialty into a single 'magic bullet' that will solve the whole problem. But I doubt that exists. But just bundling them all together is not the sufficient. Here is an approach for relating Christians and culture:

Every generation of Christians gone to the book of Acts to learn ministry practice. But we have now a double reason to do so. Our age is more like the 1st century world than has been any other era since that time. Therefore, the book of Acts is more directly and simply applicable than at any time in the last 2,000 years. I would like to isolate several features of mission strategy in the book of Acts that are crucial in our own world and time.

1. MORE CHRISTIANS LIVING LONG-TERM IN CITIES.

ACTS 8: 4-8 Text: So let's ask Acts 8:4-8 the question—how do we reach our world for Christ? The answer is: a) go to the city, b) communicate the gospel, c) for the joy of the city. From vv.1-4 we learn that after the stoning of Stephen the Christians church in Jerusalem was persecuted. Most of the believers dispersed for their own safety. **1)** One of the church's leaders, Philip "*went down to the city of Samaria*" (v.5.) If this was the only place in Acts where we saw a Christian missionary go to a city, we could hardly draw any conclusions from this for our own strategy. But as been pointed out constantly (by scholars as diverse as Wayne Meeks in *The First Urban Christians* to John Stott in his *The Message of Acts: The Spirit, the Church, and the World*) the missionary pattern of the first Christians was almost completely urban-centric. As we will notice tomorrow, in Acts 16 we see Paul called to reach the region of Macedonia. He responds to the challenge by going to the largest city region (16:16), planting a church, and then leaving the whole area. The apostle consistently targeted the largest city of a region and did extensive urban church planting and then left for other places. **2)** v.4 tells us that the Christians went out *preaching the Word* v4. That could be read as simply 'teaching the Bible,' but v5 puts a finer point on it. We are told Philip- *preached Christ*. It is crucial to remember that when the early church leaders preached and expounded the Word, it was always the Old Testament. And yet, they showed that the point of every passage was Jesus. This is so much so that to 'preach the Word' (v4) and to 'preach Christ' (v5) was the same thing! In other words, the first Christian missionaries never simply exhorted people to live according to Biblical, moral precepts. They invited them to be changed from the inside out through faith in Christ. The gospel is not the same thing as religion. **3)** v.6-8 tells us that along with the preaching of the gospel, Philip also brought spiritual/emotional healing (*'evil spirits came out of many*) and material/physical healing (*'many paralytics and cripples were healed.'*) In other words, ministry was in both word and deed. When that happens, the whole city rejoices. Notice it doesn't say there was just joy 'in the converts.' The whole city benefited by the ministry of the gospel. This is exactly what God told the Jewish exiles in Babylon to do—to "*seek the shalom (the full-flourishing) of the whole city*" (Jeremiah 29:7) and not just of their people.

The First Global Cities. The triumph of Rome's power created the *Pax Romana* and an unprecedented mobility of people, capital, and ideas. As Wayne Meeks put it--travel during the *Pax Romana* was easier than it ever had been and ever was again until the 19th century. The works of Wayne Meeks and Rodney Stark have shown that the rise of early Christianity was largely an urban phenomenon. Globalized cities became furiously multi-ethnic and international and thus became more enormously influential and central than their nations--essentially they were city states. Antioch, for example, was really a United Nations, with Asian, African, Jewish, Greek, and Roman section. From Antioch there were powerful networks that led back into three continents. Capital and culture flowed back and forth through those networks.

What happened when Christians went there. And thus Paul's mission strategy (and that of the early church) was remarkably 'urban-centered'. They virtually ignored the countryside. Why?

- Personal openness. In the village people live in very stable environments. Thus they are suspicious of any major change. Because of the diversity and intensity of the cities, urbanites are much more open to radically new ideas--like the gospel!
- Cultural centrality. In the village, you might win the one or two lawyers to Christ, but if you wanted to win the legal *profession*, you need to go to the city where you have the law schools, the law journals published, etc. Cities continue to be the main place that the culture develops. As the city goes, so the arts, scholarship, communication, philosophy, commerce, etc. goes. People who don't live in a city are at a disadvantage. They are marginal to the centers, the places of "cultural forging."
- Global connection. In the village, you can win only the single people group that is there, but if you want to spread the gospel into 10-20 new national groups/and languages at once, go to the city where they can all be reached through the one *lingua franca* of the place.

By 300 AD 50% of the urban populations of the Roman empire were Christian, while over 90% of the countryside was still pagan. In fact, our word 'pagan' probably comes from the Greek word *paganus* that meant 'rural person.' But when the cities went Christian the society and culture went Christian despite the fact that so much of the countryside were pagan. Since cities are the "culture forming wombs" of the society, whatever captures the cultural centers captures society. As the city goes, so goes the culture. Cultural trends tend to be generated in the city and flow outward into the rest of society. **Note:** This was also true for the first millennium A.D. in Europe—the cities were Christian, but the broad population across the countryside was pagan. (Richard Fletcher, *The Barbarian Conversion*) But when the cities are Christian, even if the majority of the population is pagan, the society is headed on a Christian trajectory.

Today in the U.S. we have the reverse—the cities are pagan and much of the country is Christian, but until Christians live and work in the cities at least in the same proportions that they occupy in the rest of the country, the society will continue its current drift.

Therefore, people who live in the large urban cultural centers, occupying the jobs in the arts, business, academia, publishing, the helping professions, and the media tend to have a disproportionate impact on how things are done in a culture. Having lived and ministered in New York City for 17 years, I am continually astonished at how often the people I live with and know affect what everyone else in the country is seeing on the screen, in print, in art, in business. I am not here talking so much about the 'elite-elite'—the rich and famous--but the 'grassroot-elites.' It is not so much the top executives that make MTV what it is, but the scores of young, hip creatives just out of college that take the jobs at all levels of the organization. The people groups that live in the center cities in the greatest numbers tend to see their 'values' expressed in the culture.

A historic moment for western cities

A major wave of immigration is changing many western cities from black-white polarization into a multi-ethnic city with large numbers of people drawn from the southern and eastern hemispheres. These are the areas of the world where 'supernatural' Christianity (belief in the infallible Bible, miracles, the deity and resurrection of Jesus, the new birth) is growing the fastest. Thousands of new indigenous church leaders are streaming into the city. As the children of these new Christians get education here and move into the center city professional sectors over the next 2 generations they will come to wield great power in the areas of finance, media, and culture. White elites inviting young non-

whites into upper echelons of business and government will be surprised to find there will be a far greater percentage of Christian believers.

To capitalize on this opportunity we need two kinds of churches to be planted: a) First, we need new 'grassroots' church planted among the new residents by indigenous Christian leaders. These leaders need financial help and theological and practical training and support by seasoned urban church planting mentors. B) Second, we need 'center city' churches that will provide community and supportive guidance for the new professionals as they seek to live and work as Christians in a secular, pluralistic culture.

The importance of the city in Redemptive-history of Bible

When Nebuchadnezzar sacked Jerusalem, he brought thousands of Jewish exiles to live in the pagan mega-city of Babylon. At first the exiles refused to move into the wicked city, settling outside in their own enclave. But God spoke to them through Jeremiah and gave them a startling mandate. First, he spoke to them of their *actions* toward the city. He told them to move in, settle down, raise their families there, and invest in the economy of the city (Jer 29:5-6.)

It is no accident that this mandate to the Old Testament people of God is exactly what we see the New Testament people of God doing in the book of Acts, with its urban-centric mission. One of the main ways God's people can honor his name and spread his praise is by living in and loving the great cities of the world. We have centuries of historical proof that the mandate of Jeremiah 29 works.

When we get to the very end of the Bible in Revelation 21-22, and we glimpse the climax of history and all God's redemptive work, we see not a great suburb coming down out of heaven, but a city. When the world is finally in the condition Jesus died to produce, we discover that the earth has become an urban center. God begins history in a garden, but he ends it in a city! In the middle of the City-to-Come we see the tree of life! Why? This *is* paradise restored. God's future world is urban. When we look at the new heavens and new earth as they are depicted in Revelation and Isaiah, we see the multi-ethnic diversity, population density, cultural richness of urban life, purged of all the flaws of today's cities due to human sinfulness. Richard John Neuhaus has quipped 'if you don't like New York City you may hate the New Jerusalem.' It will be just as dense and diverse a place.

How get to that great future city? When God created the world, he did not produce a fully-developed human civilization. Instead he made the first human beings his partners in this enterprise. What an honor! He told Adam and Eve to '*have dominion*,' to develop a world and society by bringing forth the riches God put into nature (and human nature) at creation. It was a call to create a world and civilization that glorified God. But Adam and Eve soon failed their commission to be servants of God, cultivating creation under his Lordship. Centuries later, Jesus Christ appeared as the "new Adam." He became the head of a new humanity who re-creates a world under God.

When we get to the very end of the Bible in Revelation 21-22, and we glimpse the climax of history, we see the ultimate fruit of the work of the new Adam—it is a city! Jesus went up to the city, and was crucified 'outside the city gate' (Heb 13: 12,) a Biblical metaphor for forsakenness. Jesus lost the city that was, so we can be citizens of the city to come (Heb 11: 10; 12:22,) making us salt and light in the city that is (Matt 5:13-16.) Our citizenship in the City-to-come, by his grace, equips us for the city that is.

Evangelicals and the City

This raises several practical questions: "Are we saying all Christians must live in cities?" No. "But aren't cities bad places to raise children?" No. "Why do so many Christians find the city a difficult place to live?" Do I mean that all Christians must live in cities? No. We need Christians and churches everywhere there are people! Nevertheless, I follow the late Jim Boice in beating this drum.¹ Jim knew that evangelical Christians have been particularly unwilling to live in cities. he established (Anglo-led) evangelical church has essentially abandoned the cities. They live in cities in far smaller percentages

¹ James Boice's cultural renewal strategy is the same as that represented in this article. It is based on city-living, distinctive Christian community, humble service to the common good, and faith-work integration, and is laid out in his book *Two Cities, Two Loves* (IVP, 1996,) See pp.166ff.

than in the rest of the country, despite the fact that cities are disproportionately important to the future of our society. In *Two Cities: Two Loves* he asserted that evangelicals should live in cities in *at least* the same percentage as the general population does—or we should not expect to see society be influenced by us.

The city is not a 'terrible jungle!' Early in Redeemer's ministry we discovered that it was not enough for Christians to feel pity or even mere affection for the city. Staff and leaders had to humbly learn from and respect New York City and its people. Our relationship with the people of Manhattan had to be a consciously reciprocal one. We had to see God's 'common grace' in them. We had to learn that we needed them to fill out our own understanding of God and his grace, just as they needed us for the same. We had to be energized and enriched by the city, not just drained by it. Ministry in the city, then, will help you grasp the gospel of grace in powerful ways. You may even come to see that you spiritually need the city more than the city needs you.

SUMMARY: What does this mean for us? God created the human family, and even though sin has harmed it, we are called to use the resources of the gospel to repair broken families. Likewise, God made the city for his purposes, and though sin has harmed it, we should use the resources of the gospel to repair broken cities.

2. WITH A BETTER UNDERSTANDING OF THE GOSPEL

Text: ACTS 15:1-25 Here we see Paul, in the middle of a church-planting career, going to Jerusalem for a big theological debate. Now, why do that? Surely we ministers need to be about the work of evangelism, not going in for theological discussions! But Paul makes no bifurcation here. Chapter 15 is down the middle of Paul's mission! It's clarifying the gospel itself.

(1) The cause of the debate is that the earliest Gentile converts to Christianity had already become Jewish culturally. That is, many of them were "God-fearers" who had been circumcised and/or abided by the clean laws and the Mosaic legislation. **(2)** Then Paul began bringing in real pagans or God-fearers who had not become culturally Jewish. And he was not demanding that, when they became Christians, that they had to adopt Jewish cultural patterns. **(3)** Then a group arose (15: 1) saying, "*unless you are circumcised according to the custom taught by Moses, you cannot be saved*". They had taken cultural norms and promoted them to be matters of virtue and spiritual merit. When did that, lost grasp on the gospel of grace and slid into 'religion'. **(4)** The Council on the one hand, in Peter got hold of one end of the stick: v.6-11 *No! We believe it is through the grace of our Lord Jesus that we [Jews] are saved, just as they are.* **(5)** But, wouldn't you know it--James gets ahold of the other end of the stick. He agrees with Peter, but rightly asserts that Gentile Christians, though free from any requirements as to salvation, are not free to live as they like as members of a Christian community. They are obliged to live in love and to respect the scruples of culturally different Jewish brethren. So they are ordered (we tend to miss this) to live in such a way that does not offend or distress their brethren who are culturally different. (They are not to eat raw meat, they are to abide by Levitical marriage laws, and so on.) There could hardly be better case study of old Luther-proverb that expresses the balance of the gospel. We are "saved by faith alone, but not by faith that is alone." We are *not* saved by how we behave, but once we are saved we behave in love.

The Gospel vs Religion

I do not simply mean by 'gospel-centered' that ministry is to be doctrinally *orthodox*. Of course it must certainly be that. I am speaking more specifically. **(1)** All religions operate on the principle - "*I obey--therefore I am accepted by God.*" The basic operating principle of the gospel is - "*I am accepted by God through Christ--therefore I obey.*" Two people living their lives on the basis of these two principles may (do!) sit right beside one another in the pew--and both are strive to obey God's law, to pray, to give money generously, to be good family members. But they are doing so out of radically different motives, in two radically different spirits, resulting in two radically different personal characters. Since it is easier to understand the difference between the gospel and *irreligion*, let's lay out the differences of religion and the gospel. **(2)** We must communicate the gospel clearly--not a click toward legalism and not a click toward license. Legalism/moralism is truth without grace (which is not real truth); relativism is grace without truth (which is not real grace). To the degree a ministry

fails to do justice to both, it simply loses life-changing power. **(3)** I can't tell you how important this is in all mission and ministry. Unless you distinguish the gospel from *both* religion *and* irreligion--from both traditional moralism *and* liberal relativism--then newcomers in your services will automatically think you are simply calling them to be good and nice people. (Skip!)

Religion

"I obey--therefore I'm accepted"

Motivation is based on fear and insecurity.

I obey God in order to get *things* from God.

When circumstances in my life go wrong, I am angry at God or myself, since I believe, like Job's friends, that anyone who is good deserves a comfortable life.

When I am criticized I am furious or devastated because it is critical that I think of myself as a 'good person.' Threats to that self-image must be destroyed at all costs.

My prayer consists largely of petition and it only heats up when I am in a time of need. My main purpose in prayer is control of the environment.

My self-view swings between two poles. If and when I am living up to my standards, I feel confident, but then I am prone to be proud and unsympathetic to failing people. If and when I am not living up to standards, I feel humble but not confident--I feel like a failure.

My identity and self-worth are based mainly on how hard I work, or how moral I am--and so I *must* look down on those I perceive as lazy or immoral. I disdain and feel superior to 'the Other.'

Since I look to my own pedigree or performance for my spiritual acceptability, my heart manufactures idols. It may be my talents, my moral record, my personal discipline, my social status, etc. I absolutely *have* to have them so they serve as my main hope, meaning, happiness, security, and significance, whatever I may say I believe about God.

The gospel for the Christian

A basic insight of Martin Luther was that 'religion' is the basic default mode of the human heart. **1)** Even professed secular and atheistic persons operate on the basis of it. That is, they set standards for themselves and build their self-value on achieving them. Though they'd never put it this way, they are working for their 'salvation.' And **2)** even Christians who know the gospel in principle and who have been changed by it continually revert to it. The results of works-religion therefore stubbornly persist in us. Christians believe the gospel at one level but at deeper levels we continue to operate as if we are saved by our works. We continue to look to other things besides Jesus in order to feel we can stand before and face God. Though you are saved by believing the gospel—*I am accepted thro Christ, therefore I obey*—the deep default mode of every human heart is to go back to the principle of religion—*I obey therefore I am accepted.* Luther says that even after you are converted by the gospel your heart will go back to operating on the religious principle unless you deliberately, repeatedly set it to gospel-mode. This then is the basic cause of our spiritual failures, sins, uncontrolled emotions, fightings and conflict, lack of joy, and ministry ineffectiveness. Luther would say that the gospel is not

Gospel

"I'm accepted--therefore I obey"

Motivation based on grateful joy.

I obey God to get *God*--to delight and resemble him.

When circumstances in my life go wrong I struggle, but I know all my punishment fell on Jesus and that while he may allow this for my training, he will exercise his Fatherly love within my trial.

When I am criticized I struggle, but it is not critical for me to think of myself as a 'good person.' My identity is not built on my record or my performance but on God's love for me in Christ. I can take criticism. That's how I became a Christian.

My prayer life consists of generous stretches of praise and adoration. My main purpose is fellowship with him.

My self-view is not based on an view of my self as a moral achiever. In Christ I am *simul iustus et peccator*--simultaneously sinful and lost yet accepted in Christ. I am so bad he *had* to die for me and I am so loved he was *glad* to die for me. This leads me to deeper and deeper humility and confidence at the same time. Neither swaggering nor sniveling.

My identity and self-worth is centered on the one who died for his enemies, who was excluded from the city for me. I am saved by sheer grace. So I *can't* look down on those who believe or practice something different from me. Only by grace I am what I am. I've no inner need to win arguments.

I have many good things in my life--family, work, spiritual disciplines, etc. But none of these good things are ultimate things to me. None of them are things I absolutely *have* to have them, so there is a limit to how much anxiety, bitterness, and despondency they can inflict on me when they are threatened and lost.

just the ABC of the Christian life—but the A to Z of the Christian life. This is radical! You don't believe the gospel to be saved and then move on to more advanced principles in order to grow. *All* of our personal problems and church problems come because we don't come continually back to the gospel to work it in and live it out.

That is why M.Luther wrote, "The truth of the Gospel is the principle article of all Christian doctrine....Most necessary is it that we know this article well, teach it to others, and beat it into their heads continually." (Luther on Gal.2: 14f). So you cannot change your heart just through will power, through moral reformation, through learning Biblical principles and trying to carry them out. Ultimately our hearts only truly changes as we use the gospel on them to change their basic ways of operating—to change the main things we put our heart's greatest hopes in, the main things we find our heart's deepest joy and glory in.

We must communicate the gospel clearly--not a click toward legalism and not a click toward license. Legalism/moralism is truth without grace (which is not real truth); relativism is grace without truth (which is not real grace). To the degree a ministry fails to do justice to both, it simply loses life-changing power. So "religion" just drains the spiritual life out of a church. But you can "fall off the horse" on the other side too. You can miss the gospel not only through legalism but through relativism. When God is whoever want to make him, and right and wrong are whatever you want to make them--you have *also* drained the spiritual life out of a church. If God is preached as simply a demanding, angry God *or* if he is preached as simply an all-loving God who never demands anything--in either case the listeners will not be transformed. They may be frightened or inspired or soothed, but they will not have their lives changed at the root, because they are not hearing the gospel. The gospel shows us that God is far *more* holy and absolute than moralists' god, because he could not be satisfied by our moral efforts, even the best! On the other hand the gospel shows us that God is far *more* loving and gracious than the relativists' god. They say that God (if he exists) just loves everyone no matter what they do. The true God of the gospel had to suffer and die to save us, while the god of relativist pays no price to love us.

The gospel and mission

I can't tell you how important this is in all mission and ministry. Unless you distinguish the gospel from *both* religion *and* irreligion--from both traditional moralism *and* liberal relativism--then newcomers in your services will automatically think you are simply calling them to be good and nice people. They will be bored. But when, as here in Acts 15, the gospel is communicated in its unique, counter-intuitive balance of truth *and* love, then listeners will be surprised. Most people today try to place the church somewhere along a spectrum from "liberal" to "conservative"--from the relativistic to the moralistic. But when they see a church filled with people who insist on the truth, but without a shred of superiority or self-righteousness--this simply explodes their categories. To them, people who have the truth are not gracious, people who are gracious and accepting say "who knows what is the truth?" Christians are enormously bold to tell the truth, but without a shred of superiority, because you are sinner saved by grace. This balance of boldness and utter humility, truth and love--is not somewhere in the middle between legalistic fundamentalism and relativistic liberalism. It is actually off the charts.

Sum: Paul knew that 'getting the gospel straight'--not falling off into either legalism on the one hand or license on the other--is absolutely critical to the mission of the church. *The* secret of ministry power is getting the gospel clear. To be even slightly off to one side or another, loses tons of spiritual power. And people don't get really converted. Legalistic churches *reform* people's behavior through social coercion, but the people stay radically insecure and hyper-critical. They don't achieve the new inner peace that the grace of God brings. The more relativistic churches give members some self-esteem and the veneer of peace but in the end that is superficial too. The result, Archibald Alexander said, is like trying to put a signet ring on the wax to seal a letter, but without any heat! Either the ring will affect the surface of the wax only or break it into pieces. You need heat to permanently change the wax into likeness of ring. So without the Holy Spirit working through the gospel, radically humbling and radically exalting us and changing them from the inside out, the religion either of the hard or soft variety will not avail.

3. LIVING AS DYNAMIC COUNTER-CULTURES IN THE CITY.

It will not be enough for Christians to simply live as individuals with the gospel in the city. They must live as a particular kind of community. Jesus told his disciples that they were '*a city on a hill*' whose life and action showed God's glory to the world (Matt 5:14-16.) That is, Christians are called to be an *alternate* city within every earthly city, an alternate human *culture* within every human culture, to show how sex, money, and power can be used in non-destructive ways.

Text: ACTS 16:40 The differences between three conversions of Acts 16 are amazing. **Racially:** Lydia Asian, Slave-girl probably native Greek, Jailer Roman. **Economically:** Lydia well off at least, business woman; Slave-girl poor, economically exploited and powerless; Roman jailer blue-collar, working class. **Spiritually:** Lydia was a God-fearer, believed Bible and Biblical God. She was a moral, religious, good person who believed in the God of the Bible in a general way. She shows spiritual interest immediately. Slave-girl spiritually devastated, and lit. runs after Paul, spiritual turmoil. She is the only one of three could call in any sense a real 'seeker'! Roman jailer neither spiritually interested and satisfied nor spiritually empty tormented, but evidences not spiritual interest at all. Practical, indifferent.// Think now of *the membership in Lydia's house-church*. The three converts show that it embraces different races (Lydia was Asian, the slave-girl was likely Greek, the Jailer was Roman), different economic classes (Lydia was white-collar, the slave-girl was poor, the Jailer was working-class), different cognitive styles (Lydia was rational, the slave-girl was intuitive, the Jailer was concrete-relational). The gospel leads them to embrace one another--they are '*brethren*' (v.40). The ancient prayer was: "God, I thank you that I am not a woman, a slave, or a Gentile"--but that is the three groups that God shows his grace to!

The 'Hermeneutic of the Gospel'

On the night before his death, (John 13ff) Jesus said that the purpose of his death was to form a new community. His disciples were to become a new humanity which was to be a 'demonstration plot' of the kingdom of God. In their relationships to one another, and in the way they related together to the rest of the world, they were to be a sign that Jesus is the Lord who is going to redeem all of creation. Christian community is a comprehensive and distinct way to be human in deep relationship with others who have been transformed by the gospel. Newbigin—this is how every culture interprets/understands the gospel—in every culture a picture of what it would be like scrubbed clean of its idols and self-centeredness.

Churches must provide a counter-cultural community that does not simply give emotional support to Christians but models the alternate human society that the gospel creates, showing how through the gospel sex, money, and power are used in life-giving and non-destructive ways. Regarding sex, the alternate city must avoid both the secular society's idolization of sex and traditional society's fear of it. It is a community which so loves and cares practically for its members that chastity *makes sense*. (It must be a very, very loving extended family filled with intimacy or chastity won't make sense.) It teaches its members to conform their bodily being to the shape of the gospel—abstinence outside of marriage and fidelity within. Regarding money, the Christian counter-culture should encourage a radically generous commitment of time, money, relationships, and living space a) to each other—till 'no needy among you' and b) to social justice and the needs of the poor, the immigrant, and the economically and physically weak. Regarding power, Christian community should be visibly committed to power-sharing and relationship-building between races and classes that are alienated outside of the Body of Christ. The practical evidence of this is that our churches are increasingly multi-ethnic, both in the congregations at large and in its leadership. Like the Philipian church

Problem with the 'world-view' and go out and do it

Individuals are shaped not primarily through classes or personal experience but by practices of their community. Americans like to think that they have made themselves who they are, but we are much more the product of how we have been treated by our families and friends than we are of our own choices. So Christians cannot develop the unique character that the gospel creates simply through having a one-on-one relationship with God. They must be part of a Christian community whose life patterns are *not* assimilated to the values of the world around it. *Without thick communities*—life in city just assimilated.

Therefore the need to PLANT churches—multiply counter-cultural communities.

Text: ACTS 16:6-12—Acts 16 is a church-planting case study. **OBJECTION:** There is a very common objection to reading the book of Acts that way. It goes like this: *“That was then! Now, at least in N.America and Europe, we have churches all over the place. We don’t need to start new churches, we should strengthen and fill the existing churches before we do that.”* Here are some answers:

- **Numerous new churches are the only way to really expand the number of Christians in a city.** New churches reach the non-churched far more effectively than longer-existing churches. Dozens of studies confirm that the average new church gains most of its new members from the ranks of people who are not attending any worshipping body, while churches over 10-15 years of age gain 80-90% of new members by transfer from other congregations.² This means that the average new congregation will bring new people into the life of the Body of Christ at 6-8 times the rate of an older congregation of the same size. Why would this be? As a congregation ages, powerful internal institutional pressures lead it to allocate most of its resources and energy toward the concerns of its members and constituents, rather than toward those outside its walls. This is natural and to a degree desirable. Older congregations therefore have a stability and steadiness that many people need. And we must also remember that many people will only be reached by churches with deep roots in the community and with the trappings of stability and respectability. However, these dynamics explain why a majority of congregations that are 25 years old or older are in numerical decline. New congregations, in general, are forced to focus on the needs of their *non*-members, simply in order to get off the ground. And so they do a far better job of outreach. Our conclusion—the only way to significantly increase the overall number of Christians in a city is by significantly increasing the number of churches.
- **Many new churches are the only way to reach the sheer diversity of the city.** New churches have far greater ability to reach the constant stream of new generations, new immigrant groups, and new residents that come to a city. For instance: if new white-collar commuters move into an area where the older residents were farmers, it is likely that a new church will be more receptive to the myriad of needs of the new residents, while the older churches will continue to be oriented to the original social group. Again: if an all-Anglo neighborhood becomes 33% Hispanic, a new, deliberately bi-racial church will be far more likely to create 'cultural space' for newcomers than will an older church in town, where Anglos will have far more power through their longer tenure. Finally, brand new immigrant groups nearly always can only be reached by churches ministering in their own language. If we wait until a new group is assimilated into American culture enough to come to our existing churches, we will wait for years without reaching out to them. New congregations actually *empower* new people much more quickly and readily than do older churches. Thus they always have and always will reach them with greater facility than long-established bodies. This means, of course, that church planting is not only for 'frontier regions' or 'mission fields.' Cities will have to maintain vigorous, extensive church planting to even maintain the number of Christians in a region. We believe that one church, no matter how big, will never be able to serve the needs of such a diverse city. Only a movement of hundreds of churches, small and large, can penetrate literally every neighborhood and people group in the city.
- **New churches are the only ministries that become self-supporting and expand the base for other ministries in a city.** A city needs many ministries--youth work, schools, missions to new groups, and so on. All of them are 'charities' which need to be supported from outside of their own staff and workers. Once such ministries are begun, they need outside funding from Christian givers indefinitely. (This is not a criticism of such ministries. See our paper on 'Why to Launch New Ministries.') A new church, however, only requires outside, start-up funding at its beginning. Within a few years, it becomes the *source* of Christian giving to other ministries, not the *object* of it. Because new churches bring in large numbers of non-churched people to the work of the kingdom, church planting is by far the fastest way to grow the number of *new givers* in the kingdom work in a city. New church development is the best way to help all the other numerous ministries in a city thrive and grow. They need a constant stream of new Christian volunteers, workers, and givers to keep them going. New churches are the head waters of that stream.
- **New churches are one of the best ways to renew the existing churches of a city.** In a discussion on new church development, the question often arises: “But what about all the existing

² Lyle Schaller, quoted in D.McGavran and G.Hunter, *Church Growth: Strategies that Work* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1980), p. 100. See C.Kirk Hadaway, *New Churches and Church Growth in the Southern Baptist Convention* (Nashville: Broadman, 1987).

churches in the city? Shouldn't you be working to strengthen and renew *them*?" Planting lots of new churches *is* one of the best ways to renew existing churches. First, the new churches bring new ideas to the whole Body. It is the new churches that have freedom to be innovative and they become the 'Research and Development' department for the whole Body in the city. Often the older congregations are too timid to try a particular approach, absolutely sure it would 'not work here.' But when the new church in town succeeds spectacularly with some new method, the other churches eventually take notice and get the courage to try it themselves. Second, new churches surface new, creative Christian leaders for the city. Older congregations find leaders who support tradition, have tenure, like routine, and have kinship ties. New congregations, on the other hand, attract a higher percentage of venturesome people who value creativity, risk, innovation and future orientation. Often older churches 'box out' many people with strong leadership skills who cannot work in more traditional settings. New churches thus attract and harness many people in the city whose gifts would otherwise not be utilized in the work of the Body. These new leaders eventually benefit the whole Body city-wide.

- **Promoting new churches gets you into a kingdom mindset. Test:** When we "lose" 2 families to a church that brings in 100 new people who weren't going to any other church, we have a choice! We must ask ourselves: "Are we going to rejoice in the new people that the kingdom has gained through this new church, or are we going to bemoan and resent the two families we lost to it?" In other words, our attitude to new church development is a test of whether our mindset is geared to our own institutional turf, or to the overall health and prosperity of the kingdom of God in the city. Will we resent the 10 people we have lost or rejoice in the 80 people the kingdom has gained? Vigorous church planting requires the ability to care for the kingdom even more than for your tribe. We see this in the way Paul talks of Apollos, who, though not a disciple of his (Acts 18:24ff.) Paul speaks of in the warmest terms (1 Cor.3:6; 4:9; 16:12) even though his disciples evidently considered themselves a particular party (1 Cor1:12; 3:4) We see it in the way Paul (as said before) constantly takes his hands off new churches. 16:40--*then he left*. What we have here is a concern not for his own power or his party's power (and even then, different apostles had their followers and emphases), but for the kingdom as a whole.

Sum: In the ministry in Acts--church planting *is not* a traumatic or unnatural event. It is not something odd or once-in-a-lifetime. It is not forced on people by circumstances. Church planting is woven into the warp and woof of things, it happens constantly, it happens normally. Paul never evangelizes and disciples without also church planting. For decades, expositors looked to Acts to find 'the basic elements of ministry'. They always made lists such as these: Bible teaching, evangelism, fellowship, discipleship, worship. Yet right there along with everything else is church planting, but it is often ignored. There's a very dubious, tacit 'cessationism' going on here! Implicitly, almost unconsciously, readers said, 'well, but that was for then--we don't do that now'. But the principle is--**church planting must be natural and constant, not traumatic and episodic**. Since we live in the Acts-world again, it is doubly important to make church multiplication a central ministry strategy.

Conclusions: We firmly believe that the vigorous, continual planting of new congregations is the single most crucial strategy for reaching a city. Nothing else--not crusades, outreach programs, para-church ministries, mega-churches, consulting, nor church renewal processes--will have the consistent impact of dynamic, extensive church planting. This is an eyebrow raising statement. But to those who have done any study of the subject, it is not even controversial.

4. INTEGRATING THEIR FAITH AND THEIR WORK

Acts 16:35-39 -Paul and Silas are not hesitant to point out a miscarriage of justice. Stott thinks that this was necessary to 'create space' for the new young church. Christians are to judiciously bring their faith to bear on their lives in the 'public' sector.

What is culture?

A society's 'culture' is a set of shared practices, attitudes, values, and beliefs which are rooted in common understandings of 'the big questions'—where life comes from, what life means, who we are, and what is important to we spend our time doing in the years allotted to us. No one can live without some assumed answers to such questions, and every set of answers shapes culture--the way we treat

the material world, the way we relate the individual to the group and family, the way groups and classes relate to one another, the way we handle sex, money, and power, the way we make decisions and set priorities, and the way we regard death, time, art, government, and physical space.

Today an astonishing array of movements, political action groups, social activist networks, foundations, think tanks, experts, writers, artists, as well as religious leaders are all intentionally working for cultural change—and working in extremely different and often contradictory directions. Christians, of course, would love to see their society reflect more and more of the Father's justice, of the Son's sacrificial love, of the Spirit's life-giving power. We spoke above of different approaches to relating Christianity to culture. Each of them provides such telling critiques of its rival views that we must conclude there is no utopian way to create a Christian society. You could certainly make a case that there has never been a Christian society (even though many have claimed to be) and there never will be. And yet, Christians cannot simply rest satisfied with individual conversions or separated enclaves when they discern the central plot-line of the Bible: A) God created a world of peace and life; B) the world has fallen into a state of injustice and brokenness; C) God has determined to redeem this world through the work of his Son and the creation of a new humanity; until D) eventually the world is renewed and restored to being the world that he made and that we all want. In short, the purpose of redemption is not to help individuals escape the world. It is about the coming of God's kingdom to renew it. God's purpose is not only saved individuals, but also a new world based on justice, peace, and love, not power, strife, and selfishness. If God is so committed to this that he suffered and died, surely Christians should also seek a society based on God's peace and love.

How should we go about it? At Redeemer we have learned something from all the approaches mentioned above, and yet we have struck a somewhat different path. We wouldn't dream of claiming that we have the answer, but our way of seeking to relate Christians and culture is, we believe, extremely promising, though its results to date are only embryonic. Here's a sketch:

a) What *not* to do. When most Christians enter a vocational field today, they either a) seal off their faith from their work and simply work like everyone else around them, or b) simply spout Bible verses at people to get their faith across. Work like everyone else, but do evangelism. The gospel is seen as a means of finding individual peace and *not* as a 'world-view'-- a comprehensive interpretation of reality that affects all we do. But the gospel has a deep and vital impact on how we do art, business, government, media, and scholarship.

b) What *to* do: **1)** Support Christian cultural leadership not just church leadership. In most churches--that's the only track we have! Taking mature Christians more and more out of their work and into church programs. Instead- **(a)** Teach ***Cultural activity is good***. Look at Adam and Eve. They cultivate, culture (same word) a piece of ground--Here's cultural activity: ***Taking raw material and not leaving it as it is—but re-arranging it and drawing out its potential, all that God has put into it—for the purpose of human flourishing, human community*** See we need to eat, so we don't leave the ground as it is. a) we need food, so you cultivate it as a farm, b) we need beauty, so you plant flowers. SO a gardener is doing cultural activity. If he doesn't arrange the raw material he has—we don't flourish. We die—we won't have enough food. All cultural activity is the same. *Who formed the world of nature (which provides the raw material for the physical sciences)? Who formed the universe of human interactions (which is the raw material of politics, economics, sociology, and history)? Who is the source of all harmony, form, and narrative pattern (which is the raw material for art)? Who is the source of the human mind (which is the raw material for philosophy and psychology?) and who, moment by moment, maintains the connection between our minds and the world beyond our minds? God did, God does.* - Mark Noll. What's music? It is taking the raw material of sound and turning it into something that facilitates human flourishing. What is writing or theater but taking the raw material of human experience and turning into a narrative--into a story that gives our lives meaning and teaches us how to live. What is visual art, but taking raw physical materials and making them into something meaningful. Why do it? Why not leave the material world as it is? We *need* beauty, stories, food, social arrangements that make for community—we need cultural activity or we can't live. **sum:** Everyone is basically doing what gardeners do. We are taking some part of creation's--raw material, not leaving it as it is, but rearranging it and drawing out its potential to the flourishing of human community.

There is no task too menial for the dignity of cultural production. What is washing and combing your hair? What is housecleaning? Cultural activity. You will *die* if no one cleans your apartment! You can't just leave it as it is. It's caring for and cultivating creation without which we cannot flourish. This view endows such dignity on all human work. Eastern religions say the material world wasn't real; Greeks thought the physical was debasing--so menial work is demeaning. But look at Gen1-2 and you see God with his hands in the soil making us!! And when God comes into the world, he comes not a philosopher or general but a carpenter! Psalm 104:30—the Holy Spirit not only convicts the world of sin (Jn 16) but he also waters the face of the earth, as in beginning Gen1:2, and continually Ps65-Ps145. The world is good! It's permanent! It is not a temporary theater only here temporarily for the drama of individual salvation, after which we live a disembodied other-worldly life. Salvation is a new heaven and new earth, permanently. Redemption's ultimate purpose is the renewal of creation. Therefore birds flying and the ocean roaring and two people kissing and a great cup of wine—are permanent goods. They are good in themselves, ends in themselves. And therefore caring for this creation and cultivating it has highest dignity, even if it means cutting the grass.

On the other hand, there is no work of big business and capitalism that is too large or powerful to be fitted into the schema of caring for creation. Richard Mouw has given a great talk on investment banking. Creation itself was an act of God's radical investment. God made a world full of beings with free will even though he knew that it was going to cost him. But by his infinite investment in creation and redemption he brings about new life for zillions of beings and a glorious world for all to enjoy. Was it worth it? He thought so. God is an investment banker: he leveraged his resources at great cost to himself and made space in the universe for us. If you as an investment banker (1) see a human need not being met (2) see a talent that can meet that need (3) risk/invest your resources--so the talent can meet that need (4) and thereby create jobs, a better quality of life for your products users, a more flourishing human community. Investment banking can be not just godly but God-like. After Mouw gave this talk, some bankers asked him if they could talk about this to their ministers, who consider the only 'work of the Lord' preaching the Word. Their unspoken attitude: *"We do the work of the Lord, you just work with money. Give us some of it so we can keep doing the work of the Lord."*

The problem with this attitude is that the very point of salvation is the reweaving, enriching, and renewal of creation! The Spirit of God is not only a preacher but also an artist, a gardener, and a banker. How dare we ministers give others the idea that we alone are doing the work of the Spirit? And since cultural activity goes on forever, in the future they won't need soul-savers. The bankers and artists will have to give us job re-training in the new heavens and new earth. (Doctors will need it too!) No view of the world puts greater emphasis on the importance of cultural activity and cultural production.

2) Teach Christians (and non-Christians!) to see all work proceeds from beliefs about the 'big questions' regarding what life means, what human beings are, and what are the most important things in life. We call these answers to such big questions a 'world-view.' Most fields of work today are dominated by very different world-views than that of Christianity. We do not know how to persuade people by showing them the faith-based, world-view roots of everyone's work.

'Culture' is a set of shared practices, attitudes, values, and beliefs which are rooted in common understandings of 'the big questions'—where life comes from, what life means, who we are, and what is important to spend our time doing in the years allotted to us. No one can live or do their work without some assumed answers to such questions, and every set of answers shapes culture.

Most fields of work today are dominated by a very different set of answers than those of Christianity. But when most Christians enter a vocational field, they either a) seal off their faith from their work and simply work like everyone else around them, or b) simply spout Bible verses at people to get their faith across. We do not know very well how to persuade people by showing them the faith-based, world-view roots of everyone's work. We do not know how to equip our people to think out the implications of the gospel for art, business, government, journalism, entertainment, and scholarship. Developing humane yet creative and excellent business environments out of our understanding of the gospel can be part of this work. The embodiment of joy, hope, and truth in the arts is also part of this work. If Christians live in major cultural centers in great numbers and simply do their work in an excellent but distinctive manner it will naturally produce a different kind of culture than the one in which we live now.

3) *Teach Christians how to integrate faith and work*: We simply do not know how to think out the implications of the Christian view of reality for the shape of everything we do in our professions. **a) *How to work distinctively***. Theological education should be about how to 'think Christianly' about all of life, public and private, and about how to work with Christian distinctiveness. 1) They need to know what cultural practices are 'common grace' and can be embraced, 2) what practices are antithetical to the gospel and must be rejected, and 3) what practices can be adapted/ revised for use by believers. Developing humane yet creative and excellent business environments out of our understanding of the gospel can be part of the work of restoring creation in the power of the Spirit. Bringing Christian joy, hope, and truth to embodiment in the arts is also part of this work. Does every business have to be explicitly Christian? No. Many of the values of a business that Christians would promote could be shared by people coming from other world views with lots of common grace in them. We do not know how to attract people to Christianity by persuasively showing the resources of Christ for resolving baseline cultural problems and for fulfilling baseline cultural hopes. **b) *How to work excellently***. They need to be practically mentored, placed, and positioned in their vocations in the most advantageous way. They need cooperation with others in the field who can encourage, advise, and advocate for them. They need help to do their work with excellence and in a way that really helps others and strengthens social cohesiveness rather than weakening it. **c) *How to work accountably***. Third, they need spiritual support for the ups and downs of their work and accountability for living with Christian integrity. Each field has peculiar temptations and pitfalls. **Point**: If Christians live in major cultural centers in great numbers and simply do their work in an excellent but distinctive manner it will naturally produce a different kind of culture than the one in which we live now.

5. RADICALLY COMMITTED TO THE GOOD OF THE CITY AS A WHOLE.

It is not enough to do all the above--It is insufficient for Christians to form a culture that only 'counters' the values of the city. We must then turn, with all the resources of our faith and life, to sacrificially serve the good of the whole city, and especially the poor. Christians work for the peace, security, justice, and prosperity of their neighbors, loving them in word and deed, *whether they believe what we do or not*. So important!

When Nebuchadnezzar sacked Jerusalem, he brought thousands of Jewish exiles to live in the pagan mega-city of Babylon. At first the exiles refused to move into the wicked city, settling outside in their own enclave. But God spoke to them through Jeremiah and gave them a startling mandate. First, he spoke to them of their *actions* toward the city. He told them to move in, settle down, raise their families there, and invest in the economy of the city (Jer 29:5-6.) Second, he spoke to them of their *attitude* toward the city. He said, "*Seek the shalom of the city.*" (v.7) The word 'shalom' meant full flourishing--economically, culturally, spiritually. And most amazing of all, God said, "*Pray to the Lord for it, for if it prospers, you prosper.*" (v.7) God called his people to live in the unbelieving city and *love* it. They were to work for its health and prosperity even as they kept their own distinctive beliefs and practices. God said, "*Increase there, do not decrease.*" (v.6b) They were not to assimilate and lose their identity as followers of God's word and law, but they were to use the resources of their faith to love their neighbor and love the city in which they lived.

Christians are, indeed, citizen's of God's heavenly city. But the citizens of God's city are always the *best possible* citizens of their earthly city. They walk in the steps of the One who laid down his life for his opponents.

- A consensus has developed about the importance of 'mediating structures'—voluntary societies that mediate between the individual and the mega-institutions of both government and business. In short, neither government nor business can create a healthy, cohesive society. Religious institutions in particular are important for a flourishing society.
- However, religion is problematic in society. While secularism tends to make people individualistic, religion (particularly 'belief-thick' orthodox religion) tends to make them tribal. Both 'liberalism' and 'conservatism' then contribute to a more fragmented, less inter-dependent society.
- There is, if anything, a trend toward increasingly 'thick' belief-religion. a) Every major religion increasing. b) Thick-belief Christianity (Catholicism, evangelical/ charismatic) is growing rapidly in Africa, Latin America, Asia. (The Chinese change toward Christianity will be epochal.) It is also

growing among new immigrants in western cities. c) Meanwhile secularism academically is receiving its first challenges in a century—human rights, epistemology, constitutional law. d) There is a decline of traditional denominations, those that rely mainly on inherited, cultural faith, rather than more intense personal faith and experience. Within the religious world, religious institutions themselves reflect the polarization between more secularized ‘thin’ belief congregations and those of sectarian ‘thick’ belief. The ‘thin’ are diminishing while the ‘thick’ are growing.

- IF we produce is a model of a religious institution that is a) on the one hand, has ‘belief-thickness’: a deep spirituality and rejection of philosophical naturalism, with a vocabulary that helps urban professionals find faith and spiritual meaning, even in major secular urban centers, yet b) on the other hand, strongly turns its members out toward the whole city, to serve the common good of the whole city and the poor. HUGE! Even the secular should be for it!

This is the only kind of cultural engagement that won’t corrupt us and conform us to the world’s pattern of life. If Christians go to the urban centers to get cultural power, they will never get cultural influence and change that is deep, lasting and embraced by the broader society. We must live in the city to serve all the peoples in it, not just our own tribe. We must lose our power to find our (true) power. Christianity will not be attractive enough to win any influence except through sacrificial service to people regardless of their beliefs.

But this ‘strategy’ (if we must call it that) will work. In every culture, some of Christian conduct will be offensive and will be attacked and yet some of it will be moving and attractive to outsiders (*“Though they accuse you...they see your good deeds and glorify God...”* 1 Peter 2:12. cf. Mt 5:16) In the Middle East, Christian sex ethics make sense, but not *‘turn the other cheek.’* In secular New York City, the Christian teaching on forgiveness and reconciliation is attractive, but the sexual ethics seem horribly regressive. Every non-Christian culture has the common grace to recognize *some* of the work of God in the world and be attracted to it, even when Christianity in other ways offends the prevailing culture. So we must neither just denounce the culture around us nor adopt it. We must sacrificially serve the common good, expecting to be constantly misunderstood and sometimes attacked. We must walk in the steps of the One who laid down his life for his opponents.

In the end, Christians will not be attractive within our culture through power plays and coercion, but through sacrificial service to people regardless of their beliefs. We do not live here simply to increase the prosperity of our own tribe and group, but for the good of all the peoples of the city. In the city I see today—there are some various people groups—and those that are for their own tribe have far less clout than those care for city as a whole—civic minded, super-charitable. And diff ethnic groups very tribal. Oddly-gays, because history of oppression—very concerned whole city—very civic minded, public spirited and as result lot of clout in cities—and earned it fair and square. Jewish community as well! TEXT? Leads directly to next.

SERVING IN BOTH WORD AND DEED--

Acts 16:13-16

Intro: The differences between three conversions of Acts 16 are amazing. **Racially:** Lydia Asian, Slave-girl probably native Greek, Jailer Roman. **Economically:** Lydia well off at least, business woman; Slave-girl poor, economically exploited and powerless; Roman jailer blue-collar, working class. **Spiritually:** Lydia was a God-fearer, believed Bible and Biblical God. She was a moral, religious, good person who believed in the God of the Bible in a general way. She shows spiritual interest immediately. Slave-girl spiritually devastated, and lit. runs after Paul, spiritual turmoil. She is the only one of three could call in any sense a real ‘seeker’! Roman jailer neither spiritually interested and satisfied nor spiritually empty tormented, but evidences not spiritual interest at all. Practical, indifferent.

Ministry Approaches: Lydia was reached largely through *words*. Though we are not told here, almost surely Paul would have approached God-fearers and Jews through teaching and expounding the Bible in a new way for them--Christocentric exegesis. This released Lydia from mere religion into gospel Christianity. The Slave-girl was reached largely through *deeds*. It is interesting, that psychologically, she was oppressed by demonic false masters, but economically she was oppressed and exploited by human false masters. When Paul frees her from one, frees her from the other. What Paul does here, regardless of your views of miracles and exorcisms--is not just word but a deed. She is freed from demons, and freed from economic exploitation as well. The Jailer was reached largely

through **embodied example**. Just as Lydia probably educated woman, needed an argument to be persuaded, and the troubled slave-girl needed deeds of service and liberation, so the jailer needed practical example of godly character. He was shocked by transformed lives. a) Heard them singing God's praise in face of suffering. Job 35: 10-*so men cry out under a load of oppression but no one says 'where is God my maker, who gives songs in the night?'* Struck by worship and songs in trouble. b) Saw, in response to his cruelty, kindness. When had a chance to escape, which would have ruined him, literally, they acted in integrity and stayed in the prison. Sum: Saw Christ-like character in community. Let's look at some of these features in a bit more detail.

A - EVANGELISM

Acts 16:13-15 – Lydia and the importance of evangelism

Paul finds a group of 'God-fearers', Gentiles who had embraced the Biblical faith (v.13) The word for 'place of prayer' virtually always referred to a synagogue, yet Jewish law required that there be 10 men to form a local synagogue and this gathering seems to be mainly or all women. Many conclude that this was a kind of 'proto-synagogue,' something like a mission-church. At such a service, there would have been Bible reading and prayer. Showing--as Jesus did with his disciples in Luke 24--that the whole OT is really about him, Paul evidently turns the service into an evangelistic event, and at least one woman, Lydia, a business woman, is converted.

Churches must be outward facing. They must be churches highly effective in helping skeptical and secular people to find faith. It is not enough to only reach already conservative and traditional-minded people. The gospel (unlike religious moralism) produces people who do not disdain those who disagree with them. Rather than simply confront those who disbelieve, the gospel leads us to sympathetically but effectively find ways to address secular cultural hopes and aspirations with Christ and his saving work.

Each church must expect to have people in their midst who are exploring and trying to understand Christianity. They must be welcomed and embraced in a hundred small but significant ways. The church should constantly anticipate and address the concerns, objections, and reservations of the skeptical or of 'spiritual pilgrims' with the greatest respect and sympathy. Do not avoid the use of Biblical terminology, but take great pains to explain such terms in ways that are readily understandable to those without theological background. Avoid sentimental, pompous, austere, archaic, colloquial, or emotionally manipulative talk. Avoid 'tribal' language--unnecessarily stylized religious jargon and archaic language that seeks to set a 'spiritual tone.' Instead, engage skeptics with the gentle, self-deprecating but joyful irony the gospel creates. There is a true 'gospel-irony' and realism that is a mixture of humility and joy. We must also work to not 'run ahead' of non-believers in being so emotionally expressive that we 'leave them behind' or scare them. And unless all this is the outflow of truly gospel-changed hearts, it will be all just marketing and 'spin.'

But the most important way to turn most ministries of a church into incubators in which non-Christians can learn the gospel as they sit alongside of Christians is to realize that the gospel is the solution to both Christians' *and* non-Christians' problems and Jesus is the point of every Biblical text. How can you do so in a way that both wakes up/converts the religious and yet also engages more secular people?

We have developed a way to help skeptical and secular people to find faith. Rather than simply meeting consumer needs or denouncing the culture, we find ways to address secular cultural hopes and aspirations with Christ and his saving work. We constantly anticipate and address the concerns, objections, and reservations of the skeptical or of 'spiritual pilgrims' with the greatest respect and sympathy. We have developed methods of evangelism, apologetics, and follow-up that are attuned to the sensibilities of a post-modern, post-secular, pluralistic society.

Jesus as the point of every text.

You must always preach every text in such a way that it reveals Jesus and his saving work. Ed Clowney points out that if we ever tell a particular Bible story without putting it into *the* overall main Bible story (about Christ), we actually change the meaning of the particular event for *us*. It becomes a moralistic exhortation to 'try harder' rather than a call to live by faith in the work of Christ. There is, in the end, only two ways to read the Bible: is it basically about me or basically about Jesus? In other words, is it basically about what I must do, or basically about what he has done? **Example:** If I read

David and Goliath as basically giving me an example, then the story is really about me. I must summons up the faith and courage to fight the giants in my life. But if I read David and Goliath as basically showing me salvation through Jesus, then the story is really about him. Until I see that Jesus fought the real giants (sin, law, death) *for* me, I will never have the courage to be able to fight ordinary giants in life (suffering, disappointment, failure, criticism, hardship). The Bible is not a collection of "Aesop's Fables", it is not a book of virtues. It is a story about how God saves us. Any exposition of a text that does not 'get to Christ' but just 'explains Biblical principles' will be a 'synagogue sermon' that merely exhorts people to exert their wills to live according to a particular pattern. Instead of the life-giving gospel, the sermon offers just one more ethical paradigm to crush the listeners.

There is a premise in much modern church-growth literature to the effect that you can't minister to Christians and non-Christians effectively in the same service. If this is the case, then a church has to either settle for being an outward facing, aggressively evangelistic church or an heavy discipling, teaching church. The evangelistic churches stress messages in their services that appeal to non-Christians but bore the Christians. The teaching churches stress the messages in their services that appeal to Christians but confuse, bore, or offend non-Christians. Some churches using the Willow model often try to do no spiritual formation (preaching to Christians) in the same services where they evangelize non-Christians. But this approach continues to have a pretty severe follow-up problem. Many seekers stay in the seeker services long term, never getting fed stronger meat. (And since the majority of attenders at the seeker services are usually Christians, the believers get stuck in elementary Christianity as well.)

B – HOLISTIC MINISTRY

Acts 16:16-19 – The slave-girl and the importance of justice.

The slave-girl (v.16.) The Greek text is literally, *a girl having spirit of the Python*. The famous temple of Apollos at Delphi, where the famous oracle foretold the future, was supposedly guarded by a giant python. In that culture, when someone was able to tell the future and otherwise had clairvoyant knowledge, they were said to have the "spirit of the Python." This demon-possessed girl's ability had made her a slave. Likely her parents sold her to some men who became rich off through payments by those who wanted her to predict the future for them. She was being exploited both spiritually and economically by the demons and her masters. She cannot be liberated simply through preaching, but by a direct encounter with the powers that bind her, spiritually, socially, and economically. First, Paul confronts the demon that was the source of her clairvoyant powers, and casts it out. But, in the process, he has also upset the economic order of the town. The men pull Paul and Silas into the public square and beat them not because they violated the 'spiritual order' but because in order to liberate the girl they cost a lot of people money.

Sum: Justice and mercy. God is not just concerned for the salvation of souls but also for the removal of poverty, hunger, and injustice. Redeemer works out of a whole-person personal development model that includes economic and material concerns as well as psychological and spiritual ones. First, we have an approach to a holistic form of 'Christian social service' for work within our immediate community. Second, we also have developed a model for non-paternalistically partnering with holistic ministries (ministries meeting economic and physical needs in the name of Christ) run by the grassroots people of the city. Redeemer also works with a cutting-edge neighborhood-based Christian community development ministry.

6. CONTEXTUALIZING THE GOSPEL MESSAGE

Jewish society sought *power* and the Greeks' centered on *wisdom*. (1 Cor 1:22-25) Each culture was dominated by a hope that Paul's preaching revealed to be an idol. ("*Christ crucified...[weakness] to the Jews and foolishness to the Greeks*") And yet only in Christ, the true "*wisdom of God*" for Greeks, and the true "*power of God*" for Jews, could their baseline cultural story-lines find a happy ending. The church envisioned here may attract many to Christianity by showing our society how Christ resolves its cultural problems and fulfills its cultural hopes. "*For the foolishness of God is wiser than man's wisdom, and the weakness of God is stronger than man's strength.*"

Acts 16:1-5 – An example of contextualization.

A fascinating example of contextualization is Paul's circumcision of Timothy so as not to offend those he was trying to reach. The juxtaposition can't be accidental. Though Paul has just fought vehemently against mandatory circumcision for believers, he circumcised Timothy out of sensitivity to the culture of the people he was trying to evangelize (v.3) It is a remarkable case of discerning between abiding principle and cultural practice. If anyone would have felt circumcising was intrinsically a wrong thing for a believer to do, it would have been Paul--who just fought crucial battle for the gospel itself. Yet immediately shows knows the difference abiding principle and cultural practice. He knows that while the gospel of grace is an absolute--the practice of circumcision is culturally relative.

What is contextualization?

'Contextualization' can unfortunately be used to mean that one interpretation of Scripture is as valid as any other. Or, it could mean that every interpretive community has a perspective that helps us see aspects of God's self-disclosure that other communities cannot in themselves see or hear. That's better, but if that is all that is said then we are on a road to some sort of relativism.

I propose the following definition: Contextualization is *not* 'giving people what they want' but rather it is giving God's answers (which they may not want!) to questions they are asking and in forms that they can comprehend. "Contextualization" 'incarnates' the Christian faith in a particular culture.

It is unavoidable.

'Contextualization' is unavoidable. You yourself have 'incarnated' Christianity into a culture. As soon as you choose a language to preach in and illustrations and humor--you've contextualized. You are 'closer' to some people and 'farther' from others. *There is no 'non-contextualized' Christianity.* Jesus didn't come to earth as a generalized being--by becoming human he had to become a *particular* human. He was male, Jewish, working-class. If he was to be human had to come socially and culturally-situated person. So the minute we begin to minister we must 'incarnate', even as Jesus did. *Actual* Christian practices must have both a Biblical form or shape as well as a cultural form or shape. For example, the Bible clearly directs us to use music to praise God--but as soon as we choose a music to use enter a culture. As soon as we choose a language, as soon as we choose a vocabulary, as soon as we choose a particular level of emotional expressiveness and intensity, as soon as we choose even an illustration as an example for a sermon--we are moving toward the social context of some people and away from the social context of others. At Pentecost, everyone heard the sermon in his or her own language and dialect. But since Pentecost, we can never be 'all things to all people' *at the very same time.* So adaptation to culture is inevitable.

This is not relativism! *"No truth which human beings may articulate can ever be articulated in a culture-transcending way--but that does not mean that the truth thus articulated does not transcend culture."* (D.A.Carson) It is important to keep the balance of this statement! If you forget the first half you'll think there is only one true way to communicate the gospel. If you forget the second half you'll lose your grip on the fact that nonetheless there is only one true gospel. Either way you will be ineffective in ministry. Paul does not change the gospel--but he adapts it very heavily. Sure this opens the door to abuses, but to fear and refuse to adapt to culture opens to abuses of gospel just as much! The balance is to not, on one hand succumb to relativism nor, on the other hand, think contextualization is really avoidable. Both are gospel-eroding errors.

How do we do it?

Missionary strategy then consists of two parts: a) On the one hand, be sure *not* to remove *any* of the offensive essentials of the gospel message, such as the teaching on sin, the need for repentance, the lostness of those outside of Christ, and so on. b) On the other hand, be sure *to* remove *any* non-essential language or practice that will confuse or offend the sensibilities the people you are trying to reach. The key to effective mission is to know the difference between essential and un-essential.

- If we over-adapt to a culture we are trying to reach, it means we have bought in to that culture's idols. For example, we may take a good theme (e.g. "the freedom of the individual" in the West--which fits with the 'priesthood of all believers') and allow it to be an idol (e.g. "individualism" so our church can't do pastoral accountability and discipline).
- If, on the other hand we under-adapt to a culture, it means we have accepted our own culture's idols. To the degree a ministry is over or under adapted, it loses culture-transforming power. The key is to use the Scripture carefully and exegetically so you will neither over- nor under-adapt. No

one can do this perfectly of course. But to the degree you contextualize Biblically (neither over nor under adapting) you will be effective in ministry.

The gospel is the key to contextualization. Remember that religion leads to either pride (if I am living up to standards) or inferiority (if I am failing to live up to standards) but the gospel makes us both humble and confident at once. This makes us contextualizers! If we need the approval of the receiving culture too much, it shows a lack of gospel confidence. If we need the trappings of our own culture too much, it shows a lack of gospel humility. Gospel humility directs us to neither hate tradition nor be bound to it. It is proud to imagine that other Christians did not find much grace in past 'contextualizations' and therefore we do not ignore tradition. But it is also proud to think that new cultural trends have no grace in them and that former cultures were all more spiritually pure. Thus we adapt.

"[When] the church had lost track of an important element in the saving work of Christ and was teaching that believers are justified not by faith but by being sanctified...as a result it became very easy for the church to revert to an Old Covenant lifestyle....Uneasiness about justification [by grace alone] produced a flowering of asceticism reflecting an unconscious need for lists of clean and unclean activities and a rebirth of Pharisaism.Thus [those] who are not secure in Christ cast about for spiritual life preservers with which to support their confidence, and in their frantic search they not only cling to the shreds of ability and righteousness they find in themselves, but they fix upon their race, their membership in a party, their familiar social and ecclesiastical patterns, and their culture as means of self-recommendation. The culture is put on as if it were armor against self-doubt, but it becomes a mental straightjacket which cleaves to the flesh and can never be removed except through comprehensive faith in the saving work of Christ. Once faith is exercised, a Christian is free to be enculturated, to wear his culture like a comfortable suit of clothes. He can shift to other cultural clothing temporarily if he wishes to do so, as Paul suggests in 1 Cor. 9: 19-23, and he is released to admire and appreciate the differing expressions of Christ shining out through other cultures."³

Finding the balance.

This raises a huge issue--sometimes called the 'homogeneous unit' principle. Are we going to 'target' some groups of people over others? How do we justify that? Paul's example again helps. **a) On one hand, Paul did focus on groups he thought strategic.** Chapter 16:13-*on the Sabbath, we went outside the city gate to the river, where we expected to find a place of prayer. We sat down and began to speak to the women who had gathered there.* Expected! How did Paul know a group of women would be down there? Lots of good studies on this. Paul had enormous success among 'God-fearers' (Gentile adherents to Biblical faith) in every town. They were 'key'. On one hand, they already had rudiments of Biblical world view--you could get right to Christ major way without (as Acts 14, 17 pagans) working on the most elementary and basic doctrine of God. On other hand, they were Gentiles, not Jews, with automatic, deep, personal relationships to the majority Gentile pagan population. In short, Jews were culturally distant from the community; the pagans were theologically distant from the Biblical world-view. The God-fearers were thus a great "stewardship" of ministry time. The key place to start, best stewardship, the best way to gather a core--was to find the God-fearers. Why did he go looking at the river. He would have immediately discovered that there was no synagogue in town, which meant that there were not 10 Jewish men in the city. So he looked for female-dominated prayer meeting. He got to town and made inquiries to discover it. He did not simply walk in and raise his voice in the streets. He was strategic. **b) Yet: Paul was trying to reach everyone.** All through Acts 13-19 we see that Paul was clearly after *everyone*. He went to the synagogues to reach the religious. But he reasoned in the market place with the intellectual elites and he even hired out the Hall of Tyrannus to have open dialogues with pagans of all classes. **c) Sum:** I think the answer is this. Yes, we can 'target'. 'Contextualization' is unavoidable. You yourself have 'incarnated' Christianity into a culture. As soon as you choose a language to preach in and illustrations and humor--you've contextualized. You are 'closer' to some people and 'farther' from others. And it is also right to have a heart for a certain people group and seek to serve and win them over others, in an effort to make sure that the new church's leaders come from this group. **But**, we must also seek to make our churches as mixed income and multi-cultural as possible. That is the Biblical mandate. At

³ Richard Lovelace, *The Dynamics of Spiritual Life* (IVP, 1979) p.190-191,198

'intake', as we initially seek to love and win people with the gospel, a certain amount of homogeneity is necessary. It would be nice if non-Christian people would not care about cultural differences, but people cannot be sanctified before they are justified!

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Sum: To communicate the gospel one clik too legalistically or too lawlessly--and to over or under adapt to the culture--is how a ministry becomes ineffective. If you could minister at the center of the two "axes"--or to the degree you do--there is power and effectiveness.

Summary

We must do all these kinds of ministry because they are all required by the gospel. They are not optional, and they are inter-dependent. Holistic ministry, in which Christians work sacrificially for the common good, is the necessary context for any convincing evangelistic call to believe in Jesus. (Why should the people of the city listen to us if we are simply out to increase our own tribe and its power?) And culture cannot be changed simply through faith-work integration. It also requires counter-cultural community that displays an alternate society to the world. Only if we do all of these ministries at once will any of them be effective. They are inter-dependent and inter-locking.

Sadly, the normal state of the church is to concentrate on one of these to the exclusion of the others. People with a strong passion for evangelism and adding new people are often at logger-heads with people who stress deep community and spiritual maturity. People with a vision for cultural renewal who want to work with professionals and the 'elites' are often at logger-heads with people who stress the work of justice with the marginalized and weak. And yet these ministries must be kept together. Churches that stress one or two of these ministries to the exclusion of the others tend to be ideologically narrow. For example, the evangelists often tend to be Republican, while those Christians working most intensely for social justice tend to be Democrats. But the divisions that fragment our society can and must be overcome with the gospel.

If (and only if) we produce *thousands* of new church-communities which regularly win secular people to Christ, which seek the common good of the whole city (especially the poor), and produce thousands of Christians who write plays, make movies, do creative journalism, begin effective and productive new businesses, use their money for others, and produce cutting-edge scholarship and literature--will see our vision for the city be realized and our whole society changed as a result.

Conclusion: Who is sufficient for these things? Not me! But fortunately, Jesus is the great church planter! He said, "*I will plant my church, and the gates of hell will not prevail against it!*" (Matt 16) and "*Therefore, go to every ethnic group and bring them to be my followers.*" (Matt 28). It's a good thing he is really the church planter--or we'd have no hope. But since he *is* the church planter, we have all the hope in the world!